Three-time Hugo Award Nominee

Printed in the USA

ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

Tales of the Human Kind, Issue No. 63

Spring 2000 / $5.95 U.S. & $6.95 Canada

Multi-Bounce

Stories by:

Dennis Fisher

Gary M. Gibson

Stephen Woodworth

Joseph Flannagan

Stefano Donati

Mark H. Parsons

and more ...

Two Book Review Columns

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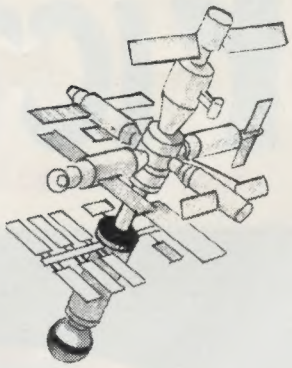
Contents

Aboriginal Science Fiction, No. 63

Page 4



Page 20

Page 28

Page 54

Short Stories

Feeders 4
By Dennis Fisher;
Art by Clyde Duensing, III

Forked Tongue 12
By Mark Huntley Parsons;
Art by Larry Blamire

The Prometheus Code 20
By Gary M. Gibson;
Art by David Deitrick

Jack's Hand 28
By Stephen Woodworth;
Art by Beryl Bush

Close Quarters 54
By Stefano Donati;
Art by Larry Blamire

Mr. Harriman's Peculiar Vigil 62
By Joseph Flanagan;
Art by Cortney Skinner

A Blaster-bolt's No Way to Say Goodbye 33
By Geoffrey A. Landis

Page 3

Departments

Cover Illustration: Strange Invader 1
By Chris Moore

Our Alien Publisher 3
By A Crazy Alien

Editor's Notes 19
By Charles C. Ryan

Through the Lens 34
By Marvin Kaye

From the Bookshelf 38
By Mark L. Olson

Books 43
By Darrell Schweitzer

Aborigines 48
By Laurel Lucas

What If? — Science 46
By Robert A. Metzger

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Charles C. Ryan

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A crazy alien

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Aboriginal Science Fiction (ISSN 0895-3198) is published quarterly by The 2nd Renaissance Foundation, Inc., a non-profit educational and literary organization, in March, June, September, and December for $21.50 a year. *Aboriginal Science Fiction* has editorial offices at 12 Emeline St., Woburn, MA 01801. **(All business mail should be directed to: *DNA Publications*, P.O. Box 2988, Radford, VA 24143-2988.)** Periodical (Second) Class Postage Rates paid at Woburn, MA, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, P.O. Box 2988, Radford, VA 24143-2988. The normal single copy price is $5.95 (plus $1.75 postage-handling). Subscriptions are: $16 for 4 issues, $27 for 8 and $45 for 12. Canadian and foreign subscriptions are: $26 for 4 issues, $48 for 8 issues and $68 for 12 issues. Material from this publication may not be reprinted or used in any form without permission.

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Aboriginal Science Fiction would like to thank Essex County Newspapers and various members of SFWA (Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America) for their encouragement and assistance.

Nano Nightmares

Perhaps I have too much time on my hands. (Or perhaps what passes for "hands" among my species — but I digress.) Yet, spending most of one's time in the offices of this fine science fiction magazine (would that the offices were as fine, or at least a little less dusty — but I digress again.) has led this alien to study much of the current literature within the speculative fiction field. And, when you devote your life to study, you are bound to make discoveries, not all of them pleasant.

There are certain themes that pop up again and again in science fiction. You know what I mean. All of a sudden, everyone is zooming around at speeds faster than light, biojacking their way into the net or paradoxing their way through time.

While these themes may seem like nothing more than a pleasant fictional pastime, you have not experienced alien technology, where your fiction becomes our reality. We have indeed been there and done that. Therefore, I offer you the cautious voice of experience. And while our own experiments in faster-than-light, biojacking time paradoxes have offered many hazards, they are as nothing compared to another topic currently popular within the SF field.

Yes! I'm getting to it! If you would only give me a minute here! Now. Ahem. Where was I? Oh, yes.

I am, of course, talking about Nanotechnology.

It seems such a simple concept. Tiny, specialized machines make changes to greater machines from within, including machines that are complex living organisms, such as bodies both human and, in my case, not.

As you may imagine, though I am the only one of my kind upon your world, I am not alone.

Yes, I know Nanotechnology first hand.

See? I told you it would come out. What? Everything? Oh, don't worry. I'll get to everything!

But how to describe it in human terms?

As those of you familiar with pepperoni and anchovy pizza know, many things placed within your body might have unusual results. So it is that the addition of new machines can bring nearly as many problems as benefits.

It seems at first such a simple concept. But how simple can you be when you are dealing with complicated systems such as the human form? Not to mention the machines within that form. For what your storytellers have defined as Nanotechnology is only the beginning. In this discussion of tiny machines, there are certain things all the scientific and creative minds have taken for granted, both in your civilization and my own. Be warned! If it took place on my planet, it can take place on yours as well.

Not the basic theories, not the many conjectures, not even the myriad stories about the miniature science answer the big questions. Consider this for a beginning: What are those tiny little machines thinking as they go about their myriad tasks? Oh, sure, they go out, saying "Gotta repair that cell wall. Gotta repair that cell wall." But as they work, would you be so surprised to hear them whistling a show tune? And what is that show tune — "There is Nothing Like a Dame" or "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair?"

So many tiny specialized machines, so many differences — the new and the not-so-new, the tiny and the not-quite-as-tiny, the male and the female?

Aha!

Now that you see the differences in front of you, it only makes sense. And you begin to see the potential for problems.

See? I said I'd tell them everything!

Suddenly, Nanotechnology is no longer enough. Suddenly, you have —

Nannettechnology. And things that are taken for granted come into the light. That's just what the Nannettes state. They are taken for granted, even though they're doing twice the work of the Nanos in half the time.

Issues are raised. Equal rights

(Continued to Page 19)

Feeders

By Dennis Fisher

Art by Clyde Duensing, III

The shovel in his hands was a good one. Oiled oak handle, not the splintery punk you got around here, and just one repair: an old break patched with fiberglass. But a sweet, craftsmanly repair, fine and silky smooth to the touch. As if wood was supposed to have glass parts. Tom had marveled at the work in other ages, as always more impressed by workaday mastery than by the higher reaches of art. The viscous glass had flowed into veins and pores in the wood. When the wood was gone, the glass would remain, forming a fossil negative.

The blade was thin with a bright edge, worn down to a crescent of old metal. Sharp. A good tool. You could work it all day and not tire yourself. A man accustomed to work would be proud to own it, would see its utile beauty. Not a shiny new spade for a young man to wear himself out on in an hour. And Tom was not young.

He turned before labor, gazing out to sea. It was hours before zenith, and the bay was dotted with bright sails. Seppie would be out there somewhere — there was his sail, red and white, fluttering listlessly. Shadows slid down the sail and away, blue-black in the harsh light. The hull rode low and sluggish in the water.

The Local was hard to see in the brightness, sitting low in the stern and not moving. Others grunted and boomed to each other across the water. The human fishermen were silent and busy, shifting their boats easily, brisk as beetles, sails crisp. Sometimes two boats would pause together for a word, but not often. Fishermen kept to themselves on the water, talked on land.

A basker split the surface in a flash of white on pearl white. The water was an oily calm. Tight lapping waves. There were waterdogs in the surf. Smooth dark heads.

He put the bright point of the tool to the soil, put his foot on the blade. Thrust. The blade bit deep; the soil was rich, full of organic matter. The residue of dead things.

"Hell am I doing?" he muttered, as the shovel turned up bristleworms. "Can't put her in there."

The worms frisked, and the cut ones puked gray. Soon everything living was out of sight. The cut halves continued to jerk back and forth in the hole. Spiny pulsing shapes. Tom mashed them down with his heel into gross matter. He struck again and again, mechanically, first with his foot and then with his shovel. Then he tossed the fouled shovel away and used his hands.

He felt his gorge start to rise, acid in his mouth. A long way off, he felt the nettle sting of bristle spines.

The pain made purple pulses before his eyes.

"Goddamn everything to hell."

A well opened up before him. Black fingers of grief reached out ...

Suddenly there were hands at his elbows. Steadying him. Gentling him down. They seemed to have sprung up from the ground, because he hadn't heard them coming.

"Easy, Tommy," said one. "It's no good. None at all."

He had no strength. Sagged. Felt himself fall forward, still at a great distance.

"Aw, Christ!" Disgust in the voice. Whose voice? he wondered. It was a thought swiftly lost to blankness.

When he woke up on a cot in the infirmary at Southern Shore, they told him that Mayna was gone with the night-feeders. It wouldn't have done any good to bury her, they said. They always came, and they could dig with hands like spades. Even if you sealed the bodies in cement and stone they would come and loiter, groaning for lost meat. Better to just let her go, they told him. Kinder. Safer.

Tom raved and swore until they tranqued him.

Later, he came drifting back. After a long while he noticed that Joe Meierotto was sitting by the window watching him. He wore the same plaid shirt as always, untucked and rumpled, his pants worn shiny. A liberating filthiness had come over him since retirement from water work.

"Tom," he said, a measured greeting. Same complex drawl. Tom wondered where Joe was from. He thought he used to know, but couldn't remember now. He noticed that his hands were bandaged.

Joe sat watching him. He was a firstwaver, from a long time before the Troubles, and old. His head was as wrinkled and blackened as a truffle from sunlight scatter. He lived on the outskirts near the Forks. Hardly a path out to the house. He liked visitors as long as they weren't anybody new, and sometimes Tom and Mayna ...

And Mayna ...

... would stop by of an evening bearing a pail of

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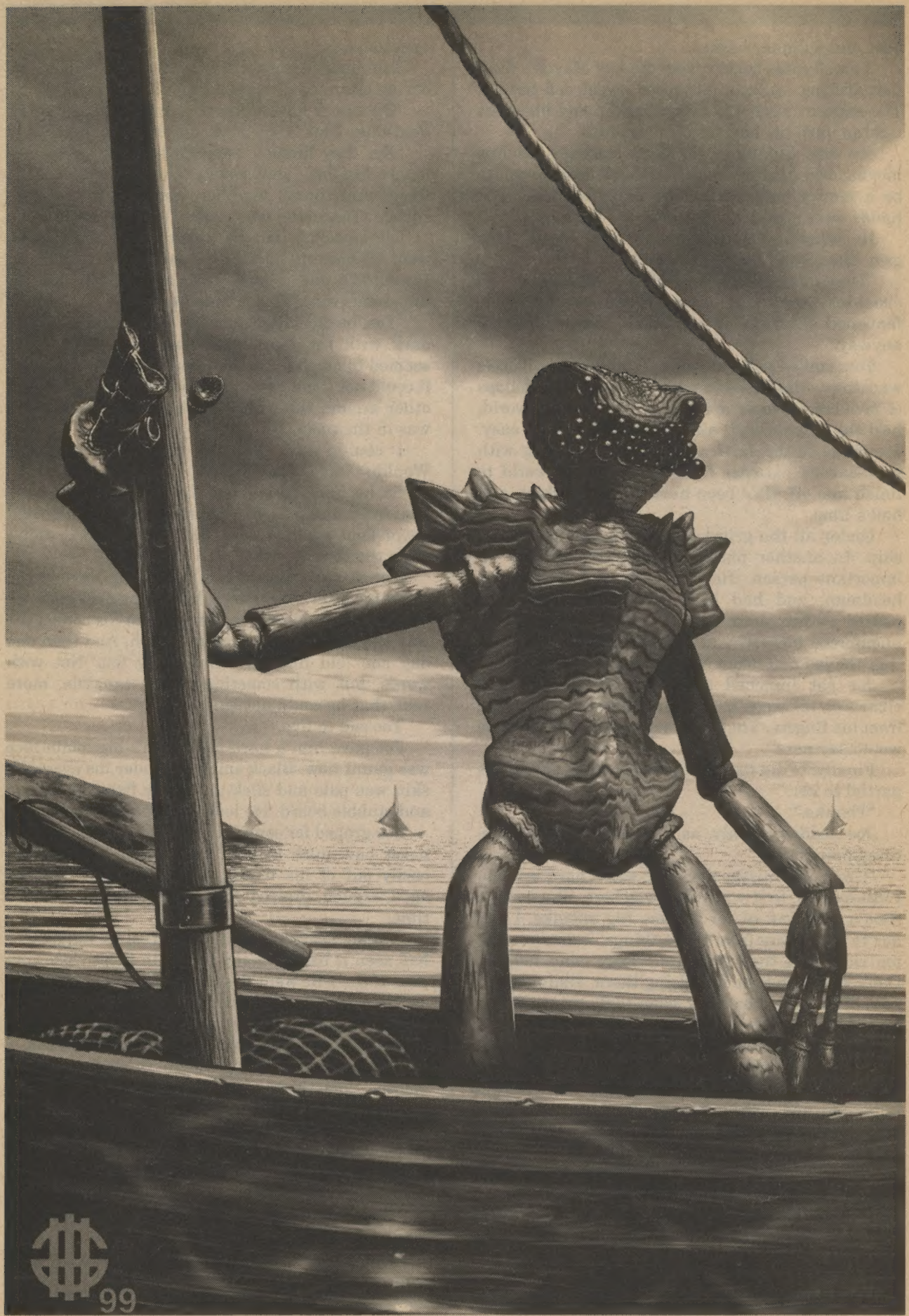

99

beer and a dinner basket.

A smell came back to Tom then, of Mayna's fried fish drifting up from a covered sweetreed basket. The memory made his vision darken and his chest tighten until his heartbeat felt painful.

Joe was talking again. Tom watched his lips moving over his fine square teeth. He felt himself to be a murky presence behind glass windows. His hands were a raging itch under the bandages.

He wondered how Joe would look dead. Skin gray like a sand beach in twilight.

"They managed to save all your fingers, so you shouldn't worry. Bristle toxin's mean stuff. In your famished situation, it just about finished you off anyway."

Tom smiled without feeling, thinking of all Joe's warnings, administered over the years like dollops of medicine. People are just a skin on this world, he'd say. Like a fruit skin. We could slip off easy. Joe clung to the earth with his feet, waiting with hard-earned patience for this precarious world to finish him off. He'd been hurt in the Troubles, and had a limp.

Under all the grime, Joe had a gift for leadership. In another place, he might have been an important person. Here he was just settlement headman, and had been since Albert Shepard passed on two years ago. Top man in the plastic, unenforced hierarchy of Southern Shore. He joked that the job had made him old before his time.

Joe sat hunched over his considerable gut, elbows on his worn knees, dingy cloth hat dangling from his fingers. They both waited to hear what he would say next.

Finally: "I did like that woman, your wife. I was partial to her."

"Thanks."

Joe nodded quickly, as if acknowledging something painful.

"Umm. My missus now, she was a hard woman. I lost her, oh, first winter we was here. She tried to shoo a Local out of her garden. Big mistake. I told her to stay away from those things, 'cause you get too close and they grab you. They can't help it. Don't know what he was doing there. Had no business. You know how they seem to do things for no reason?"

Tom thought of Seppie, glanced at the wall clock. He'd be back on the water by now. The sun had crested an hour ago. The Locals were always impatient, making up for poor working skills with long hours. The world was rich; after a time most men grew lazy. It was too easy to make enough to get by on. But ambition was dangerous. It could kill you on this placid, violent world.

"Truth be known, it was not the worst thing that ever happened to me. She was a mean, hard lady, my wife."

Joe shook his head, as if in wonder at the meanness of people. "Not like your Mayna. She was sweet as cake."

Tom nodded, took a shuddering breath, remembering clean, cool hands. Gone now.

"Guess she never did get over her brother going South like that. They never did find him, did they?"

"No, they didn't." Tom spoke too quickly and loudly, but Joe didn't seem to notice. He rubbed his finger and thumb together, and the dry calluses ruched. The sound was loud in the still room.

Joe stood up, but he didn't go. "Story was he went off hunting Locals by himself. With a burner. I wouldn't put it past him, myself. He was an impetuous man. Had a violence."

"Yes, he did." Remembered John standing in the dark with the burner, whispering. John's anger seemed to reach out to him, touch him now in ways it could not then. Fevered blood visions chased each other around the walls. For a while he forgot Joe was in the room.

I couldn't let him do that, Tom thought. Wouldn't have been right.

So he had warned the Locals. He could have kept quiet and safe, but instead he told her. He had never kept a secret from her before, and it didn't seem the time to start.

She said she forgave him. But it was never quite the same after that. He could feel the arid distance between them when she handed him his coffee, the way she curled away from his touch. And then one day she told him how she really felt. Not with words, but with something more tangible, more real, that he could not ignore.

Too sad to live.

Joe gave him a hard look. Tom's big, plain face was gaunt now. Black smudges under his eyes. His skin was pale and slick under the fisherman's tan and stubble beard. He looked deep down sick.

Joe groped for something positive to say. He had never had much trouble with words. They flowed easily out of his mouth, eased disputes, encouraged, argued, praised. Somehow it was harder this time.

A man Tom's age could die. Yes, he might. Joe had seen it before, many times, in these close couples. If the wife went first, the husband might hang on for a year, and die around the anniversary. It happened often. But somehow the women were tougher, and could survive the death of the man.

There was something else in Tom's face now. A poison. Something that would grow until doing some great act of violence would seem the lesser evil. He had to find the words now, to dispel it. Otherwise some tragedy was inevitable. The community could not take any more trouble. He had to prevent it if he could.

Say something, he told himself. Anything so long as it's good.

"Most people are afraid all the time now," he said, letting the words pick themselves. "They'd leave if they could. I can't blame them. There's a

limit to the amount of fear a person can take. Guess you know that."

Tom said nothing, so Joe went ahead.

"The problem with us and the Locals, is a lack of connectedness. You and Seppie, you're mostly like friends. I think that's saved us a lot of problems here. Mayna, too."

Tom stirred slightly at the mention of his wife's name. His chin lifted, sank.

"Anyway, thought you should hear it." Joe leaned over the bed, ready to shake Tom's hand, and then he remembered the bandages. His hand found no place to settle, no solid spot. Finally he just touched Tom on the shoulder, gentle as a bird lights. His clothes were rank with smoke. Black under the nails.

"Well, that's what I've got to say," said Joe, turning for the door. "Be seeing you. Need anything, just holler." He hesitated again, trying without success to bridge the gap of grief. "Been burning charcoal up at the camp. When you get out, come on up. I could use an extra pair of hands. You won't miss a few days off the water, I expect."

Tom shrugged, barely a movement under the sheets. "These hands won't be good for much."

"Won't need hands. You can help me tramp down the sods. Good charcoal's watching, as much as anything else. You can watch, can't you?"

"Sure, Joe."

"Don't forget."

Tom listened to the door slam, and the cool silence that followed.

He was grateful to leave the dank infirmary with its medicine smell and get out into the sunlight. The doctor, a young fisherman named Jim Palermo, had treated his hands and told him to eat. Tom had promised he would.

He checked the burner and some other tools out of store, leaving his chit as surety at the garrison house. He told Janine Shepard, whitehaired, matronly town bursar, that he needed these things for his boat. She nodded, sympathetic, and told him how sorry she was about Mayna. Tom thanked her, his eyes perfect blanks. Something in his tone made her stare curiously at his back as he left the place. Then she shrugged and dropped the chit in a drawer.

She liked Tom. Everybody did. But he was one of those solid, honest people for whom bad luck seemed to be an inevitable consequence of life, and Janine firmly believed that bad luck was catching. She'd lived through bad times before — they all had — and she hated the memory of them. Things were better now: the Locals troubled them less, now that there were fewer people to set them off.

At least Tom was taking an interest in life, she thought. And that couldn't be bad.

Tom took everything in a wheeler. His path homeward took him by the town docks. Smells of rust, tar, and fish. There was a dugout pulled up on the shingle. A basket of overripe baitfish waited in the stern sheets, flesh falling from the bones. It was too old to use, would fall to pieces in a trap, and whoever owned this boat would be taking it out and dumping it far at sea, where the smell would not attract nightfeeders to the town.

He stared at the mass of stinking fish, feeling something tug at his mind. It was a bad thought, but all his thoughts lately had been bad. His mind had acquired a charnel quality, full of grotesque images. Insane, redlit suggestions crowded his head, clamored for his attention. He avoided people, certain they could read murder in his face.

He rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. No one was around. No one would care anyway.

On the trip home he had to stop every few minutes because of the pain in his hands. The basket of baitfish made the load a lot heavier. He concentrated on wheeling the load and tried not to think about where he was going.

The cabin had a brutal quiet. It was a long time before he could make himself go inside. He walked around the property first, checked the boat and the traps. Someone had filled in the hole, probably Joe. The shovel was stowed carefully away where he always left it. Joe would have known to do that. There were no other signs that anyone had been around, except for the tracks of the feeders in the soft soil behind the cabin. He took a rake from the shed and smoothed them away.

Then he went inside, and he was staring at the place where he had found her. He'd come through the doorway with the blinding light of zenith growing in the sky behind him, and for a moment he could see nothing in the cabin. Then he noticed the white shape on the floor. Cleanly as always, she had wrapped herself in a sheet. There was a note on the table, written on clean paper in her green ink. He could still see it, plain and real, whenever he shut his eyes.

Too sad to live. And too tired, and too betrayed.

That day had been bad, horrible, but this day was even worse than he had imagined it could be. He kept hearing her voice in the thundering silence. One of her aprons was hanging in the kitchen, and he thought it was her standing there so many times that he had to take it down. He thought he saw her working in the garden. Down by the water. In the rumpled sheets of her bed. He hadn't been able to touch it.

Tom carried everything out of the front room and out into the yard: a few chairs, some of Mayna's things, an old bookcase. He closed the doors to the bedroom and kitchen carefully.

Choking the burner down to its lowest setting, so that the flame wobbled and spat, he played it over the floorboards of the front room. The boards were glasswood planks; at a touch of heat they

oozed varnish. He used a piece of driftwood as a spreader, holding it in his left hand as he moved the beam back and forth with his right. At such low heat, the handle of the burner stayed cool, but he had to stop a few times and bathe his hands in seawater.

Finally, he finished. The floor looked nearly good as new, though it was twenty years old. The bloodstains had been almost completely lifted out and burned away. A few dark flakes persisted: insects in amber.

Afterward he carried a chair to the beach and sat there among the dull streamers of rockweed, watching the sea with his old black binoculars, his back to the cabin and all it had held. In the mornings, the water was always calm and flat, like oiled glass. Shapes moved on it, surrounded by exaggerated masses of ripples: boats, snakish corms, baskers, the black shy heads of waterdogs. The bay faced east, so objects appeared in silhouette, dark on snowfield white. Static shapes were buoys, nodding with the swells, hunks of freeweed, rock islands. The snap and rattle of sails came to him, and once the popping of an alcohol engine as the Southern Shore tug shifted a cordwood barge.

It all looked and smelled and felt wholesome and industrious, and it was all false. The men out there were afraid. Just as Tom was afraid. While she was alive, in the early days, Mayna had helped him cover up his fear with work, love, whatever gets a person through his days.

Now there was nothing. He squinted out to sea, head pounding, heart filling with a directionless hate.

The nightfeeders came in the late evening, sensing death's opportunities. They grunted in the yard, pressed their obscene noses against the rusty windowscreens, scratched gently at the sills. Tom turned his head away from the window, sweating into his damp mattress, so that he couldn't catch a glimpse of their eyes shining wet in the dark. He could see their round heads shadowed against the far wall by the faint phosphorescence of the bay. Crowding the window. They moaned, over and over. He felt their eyes on him, on his neck and back.

"Get away!" he shouted.

But he was lying. He wanted them to come closer.

They moaned back, hooting and wailing, jointed claws clattering on the rocks and shingles. The noise grew louder and louder, until he was sure that they could hear it in Southern Shore.

He got up cursing, found his way to the porch. The air was fetid here with the pungent odor of rotten baitfish. Nightfeeders surrounded him on all sides, pressed against the rusty porch screens, clinging like lampreys to the skin of the cabin. They moaned for the bait. Tom had piled it in a tray on the table like an offering of sacrificial meats.

He had half hoped this experiment would fail. He felt a horror of his own actions, a useless reluctance mingled with a waxing excitement. Step one accomplished. Now for step two.

Tom hauled the burner out from under the porch table. He kicked the door so hard it slammed against the front wall and jerked open the throttle. It was a mistake, too wide, and the burner bucked in his hand, pushing him backward as twenty feet of stark white flame burst out of the doorway and fell among the scattering nightfeeders.

The night was suddenly full of black shadows and caustic, hurtful light. The air caught fire. Hot vacuum roared. The door rebounded off the wall, swung shut, and then blew off its hinges like a playing card flicked between two fingers.

One of the feeders, struck by the flames, burned like a bag of fat. The rest vanished into the trees.

Tom switched off the burner. He was shaking, his heart thumping sickly in his chest.

The nightfeeder burned with a black, ground-hugging smoke, which curled ropish down to the water's edge. Fluids had cooked off the body in a slick ring.

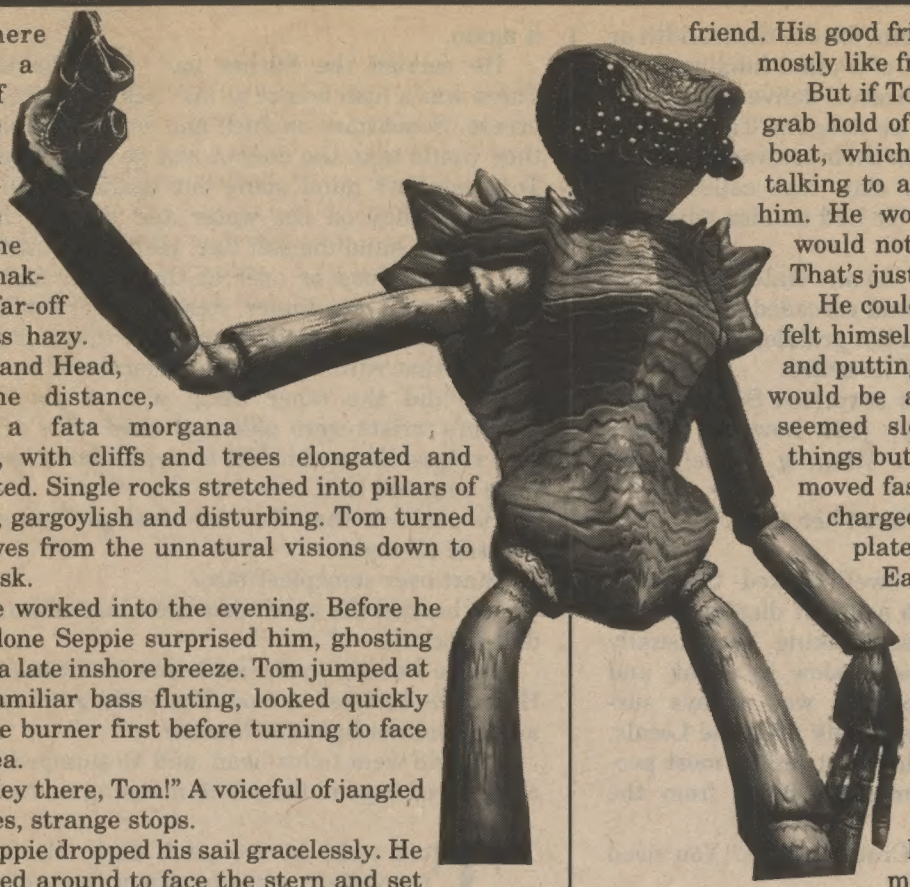
The thing had taken only seconds. He leaned over sideways to place the burner on the floor, walked out, and kicked sand over the burning corpse. He stamped it hard, and when it would not stop burning, he carried it in the shovel to the water, limbs hanging down, and threw it in. Pushed it under with the tool's bright tip. It steamed for a long time.

In the morning the carcass was gone. There was only an oily stain on the ground where it had burned. By the water were tracks and drag marks. Here and there, where the burning beam had touched ground, the sand was fused into brown pools of glass. He levered them out of the ground with the shovel and threw them into the woods.

The nozzle of the burner was black with soot, and the hood was warped by heat. Tom looked at it in disgust. He'd lost control. He hated to damage a tool, or see one damaged. It was a waste. The door didn't bother him as much. He could fix it and make it stronger.

The door had struck the bowl of a tanbark tree and nearly shattered. He had to walk back to the settlement for a new pair of hinges, some screws and a new latch. Janine had asked about the burner, and he had made some excuse. He had to wait out the zenith in town, and slept an hour in the boathouse because he didn't want to talk to anyone.

The door would not fit properly, and he had to go back to get a plane. Walking helped him keep his mind in place. It was easier to walk away from the cabin than to walk toward it. He had to stop often, breathless, on the way back.



There was a lot of ozone and moisture in the air, making far-off objects hazy. Highland Head, in the distance, had a fata morgana effect, with cliffs and trees elongated and inverted. Single rocks stretched into pillars of stone, gargoylish and disturbing. Tom turned his eyes from the unnatural visions down to his task.

He worked into the evening. Before he was done Seppie surprised him, ghosting in on a late inshore breeze. Tom jumped at the familiar bass fluting, looked quickly for the burner first before turning to face the sea.

"Hey there, Tom!" A voiceful of jangled pitches, strange stops.

Seppie dropped his sail gracelessly. He shuffled around to face the stern and set his oars, bent to fit his strangely jointed arms, on their thole pins. Took two short strokes to keep the boat off the beach. He pulled too hard, and the pins creaked near breaking. The Locals were still not used to oars, a human import, or to the greater beam of the new dugouts that improved stability and got rid of the traditional outriggers.

Seppie brought with him a nosefilling low tide stink. Crabs clattered and thumped in the bottom of the boat.

Tom didn't want to talk to Seppie. He felt a soft stab of pain between his eyes and closed them. When he looked again Seppie was still there, a ponderous molluscoid weight in a little boat that threatened momently to turn beam over ends.

"Ain't seen you on the water, Tommy."

"I had an accident." He held up his hands. Seppie looked them over with rows of tiny cobalt eyes speckling a fleshy mantle.

"That's bad, huh? Looks pretty bad."

"They're better now."

"Must'a been bad, though. You should have come out to Round Bay, Tom. We got stuff that can heal anything there."

Seppie's whole universe was Round Bay and the Bight. There were no other places. He often urged Tom to come and visit the colony, but Tom always put him off. He was afraid to be around so many Locals.

Seppie couldn't sense the fear. It was beyond him, as so many things were. Tom was just his friend. His good friend. You and Seppie are mostly like friends, Joe had said.

But if Tom were to wade out and grab hold of the gunwale of Seppie's boat, which he might do if he was talking to a man, Seppie would kill him. He wouldn't want to, but he would not be able to stop himself. That's just how Locals were.

He could do just that. He almost felt himself doing it, walking down and putting his hands just there. It would be a quick ending. Locals seemed slow and clumsy in all things but attack — but then they moved fast for all their bulk. They charged on all fours, shoulder plates locked up like horns. Each sharp scale on the skin had a bit of muscle attached ...

Tom stuck his hands in his pockets and found his knife, flicked it open and shut, open and shut. He did this all the time now, and it hardly worried him anymore.

"Are you coming out tomorrow?"

"I don't think so," he answered. "Not yet. I've got something I've got to do here."

"You just take your time, Tommy." Seppie gave a clumsy pull on his oars. He held his elbows too wide, lost power on the stroke. He didn't bend at the waist as a human rower does, and made no use of his rigid, stunted legs. Seppie rowed upright with short, jerky strokes.

But the power in the arms was enormous. Tom stared at the hands, seeing the intricacy of the jointed parts. The hands were like made things more than grown things. Bucket-claw fingers, thumbs that were opposable only by virtue of a big ball joint.

He wondered if Seppie had ever killed anyone. Those hands could tear a man to pieces like wet bread. Tom imagined himself being ripped apart, his organs spilled in the water for the nukkers and yammerjacks to feed on.

"Just that we've missed you out on the water, is all."

"'Preciate it." Tom felt a small sense of warmth even through his red darkness. It was there and gone. "Thanks." He steadied. Breathed deep.

"My clan — you'd be surprised how they talk about you. They like a man who's steady. Predictable in all things. They can feel safe with a man like that around. And you know, that's best for everybody."

Tom waited, wanting Seppie to go but not able

to say it. He wondered again, for the thousandth or millionth time, what kind of a mind inhabited the space behind the bland phrases, delivered without menace yet full of slantwise dangers. The thought of Locals discussing him in their seawash warrens was disturbing. Seppie's clan was called Long Burrow, he remembered. He had no idea what the name meant.

Seppie paused, oars in the air. Water ran off the blades, struck the water and cascaded away in all directions — droplets on a hot griddle.

"Mayna's gone, is she?" he asked.

"That's right." He was surprised Seppie knew that. Wondered, briefly, just how he knew. Suddenly his eyes were stinging fiercely. He blinked.

"I'm sorry to hear it. I liked her, Tom."

"Yeah. Me too."

Seppie paused as a swell rocked the boat. Unless he spoke, or made a threat display, it was never certain what he was thinking. Tom usually understood him pretty well; slow to speak and uncomfortable with people, he was always surprised at how easy it was to talk with the Locals. Such a thing made no sense, but unlike most people, Tom had never demanded sense from the world.

"You need anything? Crabs, maybe? You need any of these crabs, Tom?"

Tom shook his head, forgetting for a moment that Seppie couldn't read gestures, only words. "No. That's all right."

"Sure? I could give you some, is all."

"Not necessary."

"Okay." Seppie sounded disappointed. "Take care of yourself, Tommy." He pulled away, clumsy and upright. No worse boatman than a Local. Tom shook his head, waved. Seppie receded slowly, fighting his oars, the unwilling boat, the slapping water.

Tom cleaned the burner and beat out the worst of the warps in the hood with a hammer wrapped in a rag. Even so damaged, it had a rugged beauty, a forthrightness of design and construction that was like elegance. He polished the chrome. It was the same as the shovel: a form suggesting a clean utility. A tool wanting to be used. Very well, he would use it.

There were chunks of carbon in the breather. He picked them out carefully with a nail. He rinsed the filter in fresh water and dried it on the windowsill.

Finally the repairs were as complete as he could make them. He listened to the voice of Joe Meierotto in his head, telling him to put the burner back into the wheeler and bring it back to town.

"Hell with it," he said, loud enough to drown Joe's voice completely. He had once chosen community over family, and he'd be damned if he would do it again.

He carried the burner back into the house. There was a lush breeze at his back. A good sailing breeze. Sometimes on such an evening in summer they would take the dugout and go for a long sail. Tom wouldn't mind going out again even if he'd spent the day on the water and his raw hands stung from handling salt line. He'd let the sail luff, out by the Head or over in the sands, and they would enjoy a late dinner: steamed elvers and sourdough rolls, or bayhogs hammered thin and fried. She did that with a glass, he remembered.

She did the other thing with a glass, too. Mayna's wrists were pale and lined with delicate blue ridges. He used to like to stroke them. Her feet were long and thin.

He could do that. Go, now. Just get in the boat and sail all night.

Start over someplace else.

He banged the porch door shut behind him, but didn't lock it.

There was gin in the cupboard. He drank some. He had no interest in food. The cabin grew darker, and he did not light the lantern.

The gin went to his head, and he slumped in his chair, tired beyond tired. Not meaning to, he slept.

Tom woke in the pitch dark. He felt an immediate sense of alarm that solidified into fear as he listened.

There was something in the room with him.

Rasping breath at chest level. It snorted, here, there, smelling for him. The luminous sea gave him a silhouette: small round head, jagged bipedal outline.

A feeder.

He knew without thinking about it that it had come for him. They usually left the living alone, but this one would be excited by the scent of two deaths. The feeder was small, but strong. And it seemed to be alone.

The burner was on the porch, far out of reach. He slid his hand to his pocket. Dug inside, quietly as he could. The tip of his finger touched his six-inch fisherman's knife.

The feeder moved suddenly, bumped into the hall table. Tom nearly cried out. He dug wildly for the knife, slid it out, and flipped it open with fingers that seemed suddenly like ice sticks.

The nightfeeder heard the tiny snick. It drove at him, almost before he could think. He reflexively stuck the knife out, felt it connect with flesh. In the next instant he was engulfed. The feeder slammed into him, knocking him over backwards in the chair. Its weight was a shock, like a hammer made of flesh. Then it was on top of him, scrabbling at his face.

He landed hard, on his shoulders and neck. Bright lights burst in the room. The weight of the feeder was heavy on his chest. He was surprised

that his neck wasn't broken, but he could still move his arms. The knife was in his left hand. The wrong hand.

Tom had little experience with weapons. The knife was a tool, and he knew about tools. He reached around the squirming feeder's body with both arms, embraced it like a lover, and passed the knife to his right hand without losing it.

The feeder bit his forehead. He felt the grinding teeth, the stink of rot on the breath, the hot flow of blood. He should have felt pain, but there was nothing.

He heard himself shouting, trying to push the creature away with his voice. The feeder held on, raking at his eyes, trying to claw them out.

Tom reached under the frantic globe head with his left hand, found the soft folds of the neck, and stabbed twice. It felt like sticking a shovel in wet sand. Wetness and smell covered him.

The feeder jerked, striving to live; failing.

Afterwards he sat in the yard, thinking. The burner gurgled and throbbed, throwing just enough light to see by. The tanbark trees overhead made eerie, angular shadows. The nightfeeder lay nearby, leaking a dark fluid.

Why had the feeder attacked him? Feeders didn't ordinarily bother the healthy living. If the feeder's teeth had found his throat instead of his skull, he would be dead now. It was like the Locals: clumsy but strong, driven by alien needs. Or needs less alien.

There could be only one solution. His mind kept coming back to it, as often as he rejected it. The carrion eater had recognized a threat to his kind, and stealthily and silently tried to eliminate it. It was not the act of an animal. Animals flee or fight.

The feeders were intelligent. And no one had ever suspected. He wondered, in a thought that went nowhere, if there was some connection between the Locals and the feeders.

"It doesn't matter," he decided. He would keep the secret to himself.

They came back later that night, silent as shades. Keeping well back from the doorway, bodies flattened to the ground, they tried to drag and push the dead feeder into the bushes.

It surprised the hell out of them when Tom came out from under the porch. He burned down five before they could think to flee.

Now he waited in the comfortable dark, the burner cradled in his lap, his back pressed against the damp wood of the door. There was a heavy, chilling mist from the sea, but Tom didn't mind. He barely felt it. He was warmed by the coals of five bonfires arranged in a rough half circle around the body of the feeder he'd stabbed, and by the slowly cooling heat of the burner. The nozzle still glowed dull orange in the dark.

The things seemed to be all fat. They burned completely into char.

Tom felt relaxed; his mind was finally freed from violent images. He would sit this way all night. Sleep in the morning. There was time for all kinds of things.

The feeders were drawn by death, and here was death. They could no more resist its call than they could grow wings and fly. They'd be back, and he'd be here.

He wondered what Joe Meierotto would think of him now. Wise, dirty Joe. He'd fret that Tom was stirring up dangers. He'd remind Tom that this was how the Troubles got started: when the eager, forward-looking human newcomers, certain of their destiny and their prerogatives, had met the immobile reality of the Locals. Others would say much the same.

But Seppie? Seppie would understand. You have to protect your own. Even if they were beyond protection. Even if they could not or would not thank you for it.

Those things should never have taken Mayna. It was their nature to do so, and it was not their fault. But they would pay for it just the same. Tom could no more stop himself now than Seppie could have stopped killing someone who came into his space or brushed up against him.

He'd put her to rest. The simplicity of the matter soothed him. No more decisions to make now.

It would end, he knew, and soon. Joe, or somebody like him, would come by in a little while for the burner. That would be all right.

Tom could do a lot of work in a night.

A breeze ruffled the water. A corm cried, a desolate lunatic sound. Tom waited in the eager dark, warm blood or tears spattering his hands, hand on the throttle a featherlight touch. ❑

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Forked Tongue

By Mark Huntley Parsons

Art by Larry Blamire

He wasn't paying attention so I broke his arm. Not on purpose, of course, but it got their attention just the same.

"Listen up," I told the class in Deepstar's zeegee hub. "I've been trying to tell you this for a week — just because you don't have any weight *doesn't* mean you don't have any mass. Maybe now you'll believe me."

"Uh, shouldn't we call the med facility or something?" asked one of the pups.

"You think they have med facilities on unexplored planets? You're a Scout — set it and splint it. You and you," I pointed to two other cadets, "help him."

As they got to work, the door opened and Lopez drifted over. "Hey, Andy, they want you in the Station Manager's office, muy pronto."

I turned to the cadets. "I've gotta leave for a while. If you guys botch it and they have to amputate, I'm gonna flunk you all."

When I entered his office Jenkins and a guest had their backs to me, admiring his damn koi pond. "... and this one's Mimi," he was saying, making kissing sounds at one of the koi. "Cost over five thousand bucks to have her lifted from Earth, but worth every penny." He looked at the fish. "Right, pretty baby?" *Smack, smack.*

I couldn't take any more. I coughed, and they turned around, causing me to lift an eyebrow — the guest was a Flasher. Jenkins beamed like a politician on the campaign net. "Andy, this is Sarong Noy, the Rhaunian ambassador. Mr. Ambassador, this is Andrew Guerro. He supervises our Scout training program."

Rising Sun, huh? This guy must rate. I ignored his hand out of politeness and unzipped my jacket, flipping it open and closed like a street shark selling stolen wristcomps. Sarong groaned loudly and did likewise.

"Guerro!" Jenkins snapped. "Just what do you think you're doing? Do you know who this is?"

Plan B dictated I ignore Jenkins, so I slipped into Rhaunian, addressing the ambassador directly. *"Greetings, oh great Rising Sun. I am honored to be close enough to smell your essence."* This caused him to groan even louder, and I though Jenkins was going to toast a chip.

"I smell you also," Sarong replied in his native language, *"and you smell sweet."* He squished up his face in what passed for a grin on Rhaun. *"It's very pleasant to smell someone who speaks the mother tongue."* He glanced at Jenkins. *"What is wrong with your work-father? Is he ill?"*

"No, though it's kind of you to be concerned." I decided I could trust him. What was the worst that could happen if my hunch was wrong — demotion and freedom, perhaps? *"He is impatient, and has the intelligence of a rodent's sphincter."* I paused.

"... And I am not his blood."

He laughed out loud and switched back to Standard. "I see." He turned to Jenkins. "Thank you for ..." he paused while he searched for the right word, "*introducing* me to Mr. Andy. I *anticipate* ..." he looked at me and spoke quickly in Rhaunian. *"Is that the correct word*: 'anticipate'? *For 'joyously looking toward future smelling'?"*

I nodded. Close enough.

"Thank you. I *anticipate* being shown around by him tomorrow. This is indeed a great ... city-in-space."

"Thank you," said Jenkins.

"I will be going to my quarters now. Good-bye."

"Uh ... good-bye," said Jenkins, taken aback by his abrupt departure.

Sarong looked at me. *"I will smell you tomorrow."*

"Smell you."

He left and I spun on Jenkins. "So I'm supposed to be a tour guide now? What about my work?"

"Your job is to do whatever I say, and I say you're going to escort the ambassador around the station."

"What about my request for a transfer back to field work?" I shot back. "I submitted it over a month ago."

"It's being denied. Administrative reasons." He started doodling on his desk blotter.

I leaned forward and took the pen from his hand. "How come whenever someone's good at their job the brass always pull him in from the field and stick him behind a desk? I'm a mission leader, not some goddamn baby-sitter."

He snatched the pen back. "Look, *mister*. You may think you're a hotshot Scout, but until your contract's up you work for us, and we think your skills are best utilized here." He smiled his bull-

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shit smile again. "Get used to it — you aren't going off-station until I say so, which might be quite a while."

Which was exactly why I was working on Plan B: finding a way to piss off a veep so I get demoted from training and kicked back into the yonder. Fat chance.

Jenkins was still lecturing me. "... so you'd better improve your attitude around here." He snorted. "And what was all that noise between you and the ambassador? I though you were going to kill each other. Then flapping your coats open ..."

This guy was a complete idiot. "You're not up on Flashers, are you?"

"That's another thing — we'd prefer it if you wouldn't call them that."

See what I mean? My Scout team makes history — contact with other sapients — and all he can think about is our pet name for them, for chrissake.

And besides, that part was actually Wilson's fault ...

It was probably inevitable that we'd run into the Rhaunians sooner or later, seeing as how we have the same taste in real estate, but we couldn't have picked a prettier place for the meeting. We'd landed in a clearing near a lake, leaving the rest of the crew in orbit around the uninhabited planet. I popped the hatch and looked outside. *Wow.*

"Hey, guys, take a look at this." The other two crowded the hatch and took in the local scenery — the lake was surrounded by vegetation that bore a strong resemblance to evergreens. "Kinda makes you wish for a beer and a fly rod, doesn't it?" Their reply was cut off by the roar of the alien ship as it followed our beacon and dropped in a klick away. "Well, shall we go meet our new neighbors?"

They stood tall and lean, like escapees from an El Greco painting. The one in front (he? she? *it*?) said something, and they all opened the front of their robes. He was a he. So was one of the others. The other two were female, although their upper bodies didn't differentiate much from the males.

"My God," said Wilson, "they're flashers!" It stuck.

"Maybe it's their gesture of non-aggression." They looked at us expectantly, so I undid my jumpsuit, thinking, *This is a hell of a long way to travel just to play "I'll show you mine if your show me yours."*

"Let's go, Wilson. You too, Santelli. I think they're waiting for a reply."

Santelli complied, but Wilson just stood there. I said quietly, "Look, Sandra, we're all scientists here." The aliens were still waiting. "Besides," I added, "I don't see how they could possibly have any prurient interest in *you* ..."

That did it. She popped her jumpsuit and stood there, looking as dignified as ever. I swear, I'll never understand women.

Actually, they *did* seem more interested in her than in me or Santelli. We were probably the first mammals they'd ever seen, and Wilson was as healthy an example of mammalhood as you could hope to find. I felt myself becoming aware of this, which was ludicrous considering the circumstances. I decided the anatomy lesson had gone far enough.

"All right, troops. Show and tell's over ... pull 'em up." As soon as we did, they closed their robes.

I held out my right hand, and their leader tentatively extended his. I gripped it and he flinched, but held on. "Santelli, you getting this on tape?"

"Sure thing, boss."

I knew that whatever I said was going to be for posterity, so I tried to come up with something grand, but what came out was, "Boy, are we happy to see you guys!" (I took a lot of flak from the newservice guys about that when we got back, until it was pointed out that *his* reply translated as, *We are extremely pleased to smell our strange new brothers.*)

I took out my comp. "Create BEM subfile, name: *Dictionary*." I pointed to myself. "*Andy*," I said to their leader.

"*Ann-Tee*," he croaked out, then pointed to himself. "*Joccollo*."

"I think I'll call you Jock." I pulled a bar out of my pocket. "*Food*." I bit off a piece and chewed with relish. "*Eat*." I pointed my finger into the air. "*Up*." I pointed again. "*Down*." He replied to these for my comp while I looked around in vain for more things to name.

"Hey, Santelli, run back to the ladder and print out a copy of *Webster's Illustrated*." He turned to go. "Oh, and bring some chairs back, too." It was going to be a long night ....

We showed up the next day with full holo gear and a rudimentary translator program stuffed into our comps. Their recording gear reminded me of some of the antique stuff I'd seen in Grandpa's shop, but they had some other gadgets that were pretty impressive.

"Check this out," said Wilson. She showed me an object that looked like an old gas lantern except it was made out of some kind of black resin. It was warm to the touch.

"I give up — what is it?"

"They call it an 'all-fuel stove'. You put in any organic substance, and it'll decompose it and radiate heat at whatever rate you choose. Fill it up and it'll stay warm like that for a week, or crank it up and you can cook on it all day."

"That's amazing. I think I see some definite

trade possibilities here." I looked up as one of the females approached Santelli and sniffed the chocolate bar he was eating. He broke off a small piece and held it out to her.

"Be careful with that," I said. "We aren't going to be too popular with these folks if we poison them."

He was about to reply when she took the piece and popped it in her mouth. She chewed it, swished it around, groaned loudly, and spit it out. "I guess that settles that," he said.

"I sure hope so."

We got back to work, and I didn't think about it again until that evening, when she came up to Santelli and pointed to another chocolate bar. He decided it was a good chance to put our new translator program to use, so he said, "Do you wish to eat this?"

She nodded and said something the comp translated as, "Yes. I have smelled its essence and I am now ready." She proceeded to devour half a dozen bars as we stared, then she groaned, thanked him, and left.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

"I don't know," said Santelli, "but when these guys say they're ready, they're *ready*."

We laughed and turned in for the night.

Around midnight I awoke and couldn't get back to sleep, so I went outside the tent and built a small fire. I'd just poured a cup of coffee when I heard a noise behind me. It was Wilson.

"So, have you decided what you're going to name this place?" I asked as she sat next to me. She'd been on duty at the scope when the planet turned up, so she got the honors.

"Tahoe, I think ..." She was silent for a moment. "Andy, I want to thank you."

I played dumb. "For what?"

"For including me in the landing party."

I was about to say that the need to include a bio-specialist overrode the regulation requiring the second-in-command to remain on ship, which was true, but not the *truth*. I'd known Wilson since we were both pups in the academy, and she was probably the best friend I had. You simply don't leave your partner behind on something like this, no matter what the regs say.

"I didn't want to be a glory hog," I said. "And besides, someone had to represent our better half yesterday during the introductions."

I couldn't be sure in the firelight, but I think I actually saw Wilson blush. Finally she looked up at the sky. "Wouldn't it be great to be able to live somewhere like this?"

"You're reading my mind. But it's not gonna happen anytime soon." I gestured towards the aliens' camp. "And we've got other things to think about first."

She yawned and snuggled closer. "Let's think about them tomorrow."

We made love under the stars.

In the morning, as we made preparations to leave, I took a spare wristcomp and installed the translator program. "This is for you," I said, handing it to Jock, "as a token of our friendship, in the hope that it will increase understanding between our races."

He listened while the comp translated, then replied, "Your words have the smell of truth about them. I shall cherish this device." He handed me a small version of the all-fuel stove. "And this is given in the same odor. May it keep you warm all of your days."

I thanked him, and he started to go, then turned back. "Ann-Tee, I have a question. We are from Rhaun, yet among yourselves I have heard you refer to us as *Flashers*. What does this mean?"

I shrugged and told him. He burst into a fit of groaning laughter, and when he could catch his breath he explained, "We don't share your modesty taboo, but among my people touching among non-blood is frowned upon. In fact," he confided, "we too have a nickname for your race ... Touchie-Feelies." This time we both laughed. I always feel better about someone when I know they have a sense of humor.

"What the heck are you drinking, Sarong?" We were relaxing in the executive lounge after spending the day touring Deepstar. "It smells like turpentine."

He held it up. "You are inquiring about this? It's an organic solvent synthesized from a vegetable base." My God — it *was* turpentine. "When we travel we *kumpuhr* ... your closest word is *adapt* ... ourselves to subsist on it. It makes things simpler."

"You mean that's *all* you eat?"

"Essentially, yes, although we can also derive energy from related compounds." He sniffed at the glass in my hand. "And whattaheck — is that the correct phrase? — are *you* drinking?"

"It's mostly alcohol ..." I ended up having to sketch an ethanol molecule on a napkin for him.

"Yes, we are familiar with that," he said when

he could finally make sense out of my chicken scratchings. "We use a similar substance as a motor fuel." He stuck a finger in my glass and tasted it. Like I said, these guys are nothing if not direct. "I believe my current *kumpuhr* will accommodate this. Tell me, Mr. Andy. Would it be considered polite for me to partake of this alcohol?"

"Of course. Would you like some?"

"Yes, I would."

"Don't go away."

"Why should I go away? Where would I go?"

I just shook my head. "Never mind. I'll be right back."

I returned with half a liter of the finest vodka Deepstar's vacuum still had to offer. I shouldn't have bothered to bring a glass — he upended the bottle and downed it in one long swig.

"Thank you," he replied, as I sat there with my mouth open, waiting for him to fall on his face. "I believe that will supply sufficient nourishment for this evening."

Just then dinner was served, which was fine with me — people were starting to stare. Everyone had the usual algae steaks except Jenkins, of course — he had his special veep food shipped in just for him at an astronomical cost. I wasn't the only one who'd noted the discrepancy.

"What are you eating, Mr. Jenkins? It smells different from Mr. Andy's food."

Jenkins looked flustered. "This? It's ... uh, grilled salmon steak, I believe."

Sarong turned to me and spoke in Rhaunian. "*I am unfamiliar with your customs in these matters. Would it be permissible for me to sample his meal?*"

It was too good to pass up. Plan B, you know ... "*Certainly.*"

He reached across the table with one of those long skinny arms of his and snagged a morsel, pausing briefly to sniff it before popping it into his mouth. After giving it a good chew he spat it onto his plate and groaned. Jenkins was flabbergasted.

"This grilsammonstake is very ... interesting. Could I possibly request it for dinner tomorrow?"

Jenkins started coughing and had to drink some water before he could speak. I don't think he relished the idea of giving up one of his precious kilobuck meals just because an alien thought it was "interesting," but on the other hand Sarong *was* a planetary ambassador, and I don't think he wanted to cause an incident.

"Well ... um ... sure. I'll see what I can do ..." he said and tried to change the subject, but Sarong wouldn't let him, at least not yet.

"Is there a problem with procuring the food?" Sarong asked. "I must know."

"No, no problem."

"Are you quite certain? If there is even the least possible doubt ..."

Jenkins set down his glasses. "Of course I'm certain! Now ..." he put on his politician's smile, "how did you like your little tour today ..."

The next morning, when I heard that Wilson's ship had docked, I was surprised at how happy I felt. I must have missed her more than I thought.

"... and I'm going to take a break from scouting for a while."

"You're kidding. I thought you loved it," I said. We were catching each other up over a pot of coffee in her quarters.

"Oh, I do. You know that. I'm just getting sick of living in a tin can."

"Are you coming back here to train pups with me?"

"Nope ... this is just another tin can, only bigger." She stood up. "Let me give you a hint." And she greeted me ... Rhaunian fashion.

I laughed. "You're going to be a stripper? You've got the equipment for it, but let me tell you, you're gonna take a major cut in pay ..."

She threw a crumpled napkin at me. "Shut up and listen. You probably heard they're establishing a Terran-Rhaunian embassy on Tahoe?"

I nodded. It was the ideal location — suitable to both parties and located smack in between.

"Well, I managed to get a position there. Department of Scientific Exchange."

"That's great!"

"Yeah, and wait'll you hear the best part ..." Her eyes had this way of sparkling when she was excited about something. "I saved a slot for you, too!"

I shook my head slowly. "I don't think so ..."

"Huh?" She pulled her kimono tightly around her, even though it was a perfect twenty-two degrees in there. "Oh, I see. You're seeing somebody on the station ..."

I swear, sometimes I think I understand the Flashers better than I do the females of my own species. "Quit pouting. It doesn't become you," I said.

"I am *not* pouting."

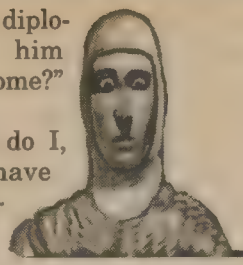
I held her face between my hands and looked into her eyes. "I'm not 'seeing somebody,' as you so quaintly put it. And I shouldn't even have to tell you that there's nothing in the world I'd rather do than go back to Tahoe with you ..."

She seemed unconvinced. "Really?"

"Really. But I'm still under contract, and there's no way Jenkins is going to let me go. He thinks it's a feather in his cap to keep me here training Scout pups. He parades me around like some sort of trained poodle ... yesterday he had me give a guided tour of the station to the Rhaunian ambassador."

"Seriously? I'd love to meet him, if just to brush up on the language. I haven't spoken it with a native since we left Tahoe."

"They're having a big diplomatic sit-down for him tonight. Why don't you come?"



"I don't think I rate."

"Technically, neither do I, but Sarong and I have become kind of buddy-buddy. I'll tell him another one of the original *strange new brothers* would like to meet him, and he'll get you an invite."

"Do you mean it?"

"Absolutely. I'll pick you up at eighteen hundred."

"Thanks." She put her arms around me and gave me a kiss. "And don't worry too much about Jenkins treating you like a trained poodle. He's obviously forgotten the ancient saying on the subject."

"And what's that?"

She pressed her palms together. "*Regretful is he ...*" she intoned, "*... who forgets that poodle is but small wolf with perm.*"

I groaned. "Oh, God ... and to think that I actually *missed* you."

She slugged me, but her eyes were sparkling.

All these years and I'd never seen Wilson in an evening dress. I'll have to take her to dinner more often.

When we arrived, there were two seats remaining, one on either side of Sarong, and by the time the food was served Wilson and the ambassador were deep in conversation. I wasn't paying much attention when Sarong suddenly stood up.

"Mr. Jenkins, this is not grilsammonstake."

Jenkins looked up, the picture of innocence. "Oh? It certainly looks like it to me."

"*Looks*? What do looks have to do with it? There is no animal protein in this food."

"How can you tell?"

"*How can I tell*?" Sarong was getting agitated. He looked wildly around the room until his eyes lit on a pair of candlesticks. "Do you see those ... those ... *objects*?" Jenkins nodded. "If I were to color one of them blue, could you tell it from the other?"

"Of course. I don't see what ..."

"Then why ask how I can tell this is not grilsammonstake?"

"They swore no one could tell," Jenkins mumbled.

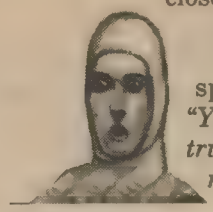
"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked him.

"The boys in hydroponics. They whipped it up and said it would look and taste just like the real thing."

"Well, evidently Sarong can tell the difference. You'd better get him some real salmon."

"There isn't any more," he admitted.

Sarong slumped back in his chair, his eyes closed.



"Sarong, are you okay?"

He opened one eye and spoke to me in Rhaunian. "*Your words had the smell of truth, my friend. He truly is a rodent's sphincter.*"

"*What is the problem, Rising Sun? Are you ill?*"

"*He promised* grilsammonstake, *so I have undergone* kumpuhr *for it. Now he says there is no* grilsammonstake. *I can not believe I am smelling this.*"

"*How will this deceit affect you*?" Suddenly I had a terrible thought. "*Are our algae and plankton toxic to you*?"

"*Nothing is toxic to us.*" He grunted. "*Except our own bodies, on occasion.*"

"*What do you mean*?"

"*We can derive nourishment from almost any substance, provided we have allowed our bodies to adapt to it. It is a trait evolved over millions of years by all life forms on Rhaun due to changing conditions. This is the principle we used to develop the all-fuel stove. The problem arises when one has undergone* kumpuhr *for a particular substance and then that substance is not available.*"

"*What happens then?*"

"*Sometimes nothing. Sometimes a minor period of discomfort while the body readjusts. Sometimes worse.*"

"*Can you undergo kumpuhr for a new substance, such as vegetable matter?*"

"*I could, but unfortunately there is an alternate supply of animal protein available for my stomach to attempt to digest, and I am powerless to stop it.*"

"*What is that?*"

"*Myself.*" He closed his eyes.

Oh, shit. "Jenkins!"

He looked over. "What? Is he going to be okay, or is he still miffed about the fish?"

I wanted to strangle him. "Where's the salmon you promised him?"

"I told you, there isn't any. Like I said, the foodlab crew said they could synthesize it, so I didn't sweat it. It looks okay to me. What's the big deal?"

I didn't have time to explain it to him. "Is there anything else? Trout? Swordfish?"

"No."

I was getting desperate. I didn't know how flexible Sarong's current *kumpuhr* was, but anything was worth a try. "What about chicken?"

"No."

"Any steaks? Pork? Leg of lamb? *Anything*?"

"You've got to be kidding." He scowled. "Look, in case I haven't made it clear, the station's out of imported food. Period. I know he wanted salmon, but he'll just have to make do with what we've got, like the rest of us." He indicated the soyapatties

on his plate with distaste. "Do you think I *like* eating this?"

I turned to Wilson. "How's he doing?"

"I'm not sure. He hasn't opened his eyes and he doesn't respond to me, but he's still breathing."

I placed a hand on Sarong's shoulder. It was hot. "*Sun? Rising Sun, can you smell me?*"

"*I smell you, my friend,*" he said without opening his eyes.

"*Apparently there is no salmon. What can we do for you? Is there medical action we can take?*"

"*No, though I would request that you have everyone leave the room. I believe some humans acquire a condition where their digestive acids eat through their stomach lining?*"

"*Yes. We call it an* ulcer."

"*This will be analogous to that, though perhaps multiplied by a thousand. It will not be a pleasant scene to witness. Please inform your medical personnel to wear protective clothing when they clean up my remains.*"

"*Do not give up hope. We will do something.*"

"*If there is no* grilsammonstake, *there is nothing to be done.*" He looked at me. "*But I thank you for your concern. Can you smell it?*"

"*What?*"

"*Death. I can smell my death approaching.*" He groaned, a short laugh. "*And believe me, no matter what our poets say, it does not smell sweet.*"

Damn. There had to be something. I wracked my brain, trying to think of ... suddenly it hit me. It was so obvious I laughed.

"*You find that humorous also, my friend?*"

"*Not in the least.*" I stood up and looked at Wilson. "Stay with him. I'll be right back." To Sarong I said, "Hang on, buddy."

"*Hang on?* Hang on to what? I am not falling ..."

"Never mind." I ran out of the room.

Now I swear, Plan B was the furthest thing from my mind. I was just trying to save a friend's life. Honest.

Sarong was moaning weakly in his chair when I returned. Wilson was at his side, trying to console him, while Jenkins and the other veeps looked on in sick fascination. I swept a platter in front of Sarong and said in my best waiterly fashion, "Mr. Ambassador, your *grilsammonstake*, I believe."

He sniffed it and groaned so loud the walls shook. When he'd put away about a kilogram, he slowed down enough to talk. "*My gratitude is so overwhelming that I cannot express it.*"

"*No need to. I am happy to smell life with you.*"

He switched to Standard. "I gripped on, buddy."

Gripped on? "Oh ... you hung on?"

"Yes. Wilson helped."

"I'm sure she did."

"She promised me that if I died she would repay Jenkins for his deceit. Tell me, what does *vivisect* mean?"

I looked at Wilson. She doodled something on a napkin and slid it to me with a questioning look. A Japanese epigram depicting a koi. I nodded and she smiled, placing a finger beside her nose.

"Well, is he going to be all right, or what?" said Jenkins.

I looked at Sarong, who was happily munching down a few thousand dollars' worth of food. "I think he'll be fine, no thanks to you."

"To me? I didn't do anything. And where did you find the fish?"

I held up my laser. "I'll give you a hint — the lock on your office door no longer works."

It took him a second. "*What?*" He flipped over a piece on Sarong's plate and saw the mottled pattern on the skin. He toasted a chip. He really did.

Like I said, I didn't plan all this, but I've been a Scout long enough to know how to improvise on my feet. I slipped my wristcomp into record — the Corp's contracts were supposed to be ironclad, and I might want proof later, but I had to get it from him before he calmed down and realized I'd saved his career and maybe his life.

When he started showing signs of winding down I said, "Stuff it, you moron! You can't do anything to me — I'm under contract, remember?"

That got him going again. "*What?*" His face was bright red. "To hell with that — you're fired!"

"But what about my contract?" I asked innocently.

"I don't give a *damn* about your contract. As a Corporate Vice President I've got the authority to buy it out. You're fired. Do you hear me? Fired! I want you off this station by tomorrow!"

I looked over at Wilson, losing the battle to keep a fish-eating grin off my face. "Now where do you suppose I could find a lift off-station on such short notice ...?" ❑

Moving?

If you plan to move in the next three months, please be sure to let us know your change of address.

The U.S Postal Service will only forward 2nd class mail for four weeks after a move.

Happy 1900!

Happy 1900. I'm sorry, but that's what our computers tell us. All the dates come up 1900. We seem to be caught (all by ourselves) in a little space-time distortion where the Y2K bug actually *did* do something.

Those of us at *Aboriginal* strongly suspect that this problem is directly related to the presence of our Alien Publisher, who truly preferred the last century and millennium to the one we are in now.

"It will only get worse," is what the old AP has been mumbling for the past week or two since 1999 ended. "It's already worse!"

First of all he was upset that there weren't two weeks between the final NFL playoff game and the Super Bowl. "Not enough time. Not enough time," he mumbled. "The odds won't change." (He also hasn't stopped cursing something called "instant replay," and has been absolutely furious about some "zany kickoff return" and what somebody called "Buffalo Bill" did to someone called "Doug Flutie," but we haven't a clue what that's all about.)

The mumblings, and numerous furtive phone calls during the week of January 23, 2000, have created a strong suspicion among the staff that the AP has been consulting with his financial advisors ... known in more mundane circles as "bookies."

The AP had us spend the last month of 1999 upgrading all of our software, replacing motherboards and BIOSes on our PCs so that we wouldn't be affected by the Y2K bug. I suggested a can of Raid, instead, but the AP would have none of it.

"Fiction is timeless," I told him. "It doesn't matter what year the computer thinks it is."

"Poppycock!" was the only response I received. "Upgrade the database software. Check out the Lotus website."

So I did. It appeared that the old Lotus Approach 2.0 that the AP liked so much was not really Y2K approved because the full year (2000) would have to be typed in for all dates or it wouldn't sort by date correctly.

"Upgrade to Lotus Approach 3.0," the AP screamed, when informed that all versions of Approach from 3.0 on were compliant.

"But Lotus Suite 2000 is available," I protested.

"No. Buy 3.0. We can get it cheap."

"Typical publisher," I mumbled under my breath and ordered a copy.

But when we installed it and imported all the data from Lotus Approach 2.0, all the dates which had been 2000 defaulted to 1920.

So we went back to Lotus Approach 2.0 and changed all the years 2000 to 00, thinking the new Approach 3.0 would realize 00 was really 2000.

Nope. It sees 00 as 1900.

Now, as I said, this doesn't matter a whit, since the humans who operate the computers know what year it really is (and that the new millennium doesn't actually begin until 2001).

But the Lotus Approach 3.0 database doesn't, so most of you will have to travel back to 1900 to receive the next issue of the magazine, because we think the U.S. Postal Service also uses Lotus Approach 3.0.

While you're there, please leave a message for the Boston Red Sox, warning them against trading Babe Ruth to the Yankees in 1920 so the owner can invest in "No, No Nannette." ❑

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Alien Publisher

(Continued from Page 3)

are promoted for all microtechnology. Infinitesimally small books like *Nanos are from Arcturus, Nannettes are from the Crab Nebula* hit the Nano-bestseller list.

Soon tiny little signs appear. "A Nannette needs a Nano like a microfish needs a really tiny bicycle."

The eventual fallout of all this is all Nanoprobes are equal, so when they begin to reproduce, it therefore causes additional problems. The newly birthed Nanos need care which neither working parent might provide, which leads, inevitably to Nanonannies. The unused portions of the host's brain become Nano day care centers, Nano schools, and much much more. One way or another, you soon find soccer games being played in your medulla oblongata. And then, when you think they can't mess up your system any more —

What? You don't want me going into that? You'll do what? You wouldn't.

Ahem. Nanos are good. Forget I said anything. Nanotechnolo-gy. Go ahead. Rush right out. Do it now.

There. Are you happy? Then will you give me back my intestines?

Sorry. Ignore that last bit. The editorial's over. ❑

The Prometheus Code

By Gary M. Gibson

Art by David Deitrick

Harry took the jet up to Mach One. The dunes and gravelly red dirt of the Australian Outback blurred together into a smooth-featured plain flashing past at supersonic speeds; from the ground the jet was like a silvery needle burning with reflected sunlight. Somewhere far overhead was the Southern Star orbital station, a UN-funded space platform that Harry had called home for almost five years now, on and off. He was almost at his destination, the jet's guidance system inexorably drawing him nearer and nearer to the coordinates he'd input. He spoke a word into the microphone that curved around in front of his mouth, and displays flashed onto the retinas of his eyes, showing the white infrared flash of a running engine somewhere ahead, maybe a couple of dozen klicks.

There; it slid by him, an anomaly against the monotonous red plain, already far behind. The jet curved around and back again, finally slowing down almost to a dead stop above the desert floor, slowly lowering itself on VTOL engines a couple of dozen yards from a pair of sea-green trucks. Dust whipped across windscreens and people alike in a miniature sandstorm. As a UN-registered shuttle pilot, Harry had the right to take a jet out on a practice run over the desert. It was a special privilege for those working on the orbital platforms, a way of letting loose after many months trapped on board the confined space of Southern Star. Only this time the need was more urgent. Still, it had been too long since he'd had a chance to blast across the desert with a couple of thousand horsepower under him. It was an adrenaline kick he sorely missed, and it filled him with a temporary confidence.

How did it come to this? he thought to himself as he manoeuvered into a landing position. I don't even know what the hell I'm really doing here. Risking my neck and a court-martial for someone I haven't seen for twenty years.

Harry could see two men standing by the trucks, a safe distance from the jet. Even from this distance Harry could see the fear in their faces. One of them was holding a shotgun in both hands, barrel pointing to the ground. Taking care not to make any sudden moves, Harry pushed up the transparent hatch and hauled himself out of the tiny cockpit, grabbing a rung and lowering himself down. The heat hit him as hard as if he'd suddenly stepped in front of a blast furnace. He took off his visored helmet and immediately felt an ocean of sweat run down his face. Damn, but it was hot. At first he couldn't see anything for the sunlight dazzling him, and he wiped at his face with gloved hands. One of the trucks had radar equipment mounted above the cabin, and Harry felt his heart sink; just more confirmation that he'd been right. He put his arms up above his head and walked forward a few steps.

"Jack!" he shouted. "Jack, is that you?" He could have been wrong; neither of the figures looked immediately familiar, but Jack could have changed. People could change a lot over twenty years.

They seemed to confer heatedly, then one of them stepped forward, a figure tanned so deeply Harry thought he was an Aboriginal at first, until he got a closer look at the face peering from above a thick beard rapidly turning white. Older, more wrinkled, but familiar in the way the eyes darted around. He was wearing faded cut-off jeans and a sweat-stained Sydney University t-shirt. He'd put on a lot of weight.

"Goddamn," the other man said. "I will absolutely be god-damned. Harry, is that you?" His look of astonishment faded into a widening grin, and the immediate purpose of the trip momentarily disappeared from Harry's mind.

Jack started laughing. "Harry, you mad bastard — trust you to make an entrance like that! I mean, most people would have taken a car —"

Jack clapped a hand on his shoulder, and it turned into a bone-crushing hug that took him by surprise. But then he found himself grinning and chuckling too, and it was as if twenty years had dissolved away to nothing. He walloped Jack on the back of his shoulders with a gloved fist. It had been a long time.

"Jack! Get Jack!" Harry screamed hoarsely. Bunzie and some of the roadies waded into the melee at the front of the stage. Jack had dived headfirst into the audience; his guitar lay on the stage, hissing with distortion, just on the edge of yowling feedback. Edison still hadn't noticed anything and continued thrashing away at the drums somewhere behind Harry. The audience — somehow audience didn't seem the right word for the mob

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baying at his feet — was composed mainly of students from the local art school, mostly staggering under the weight of excessive alcohol abuse. A bunch of skinheads had appeared from nowhere, the real thing, ugly and mean and looking for a fight. Harry thought he'd seen them coming out of the toilets. Which meant the band would have to pay for the window they'd broken to get in. Assuming they got out alive. Students and skinheads; with the kind of stuff that was going on all across Europe, it could turn into a genuine riot, the kind that made the headlines.

"You fucking fascists!" one of the students screamed at the horde of invaders, barely audible over the racket still blasting out of the amps. Someone grabbed for his leg, and Harry kicked, going down in a hail of fists as the skinheads finally made it to the front of the stage. Bunzie, their manager, was at the side of the stage making throat-cutting motions; the gig was over, as if they hadn't figured it out already. Harry managed to get a skinhead square in the face with a punch; he'd been making Nazi salutes from the side of the stage in the direction of a bunch of students who were trying to fight their way toward him.

"I've been talking to Mick at EMI," said Bunzie the next morning. "He was at last night's gig."

Connor — Radio Icarus's bass player for that month — just blew cigarette smoke in the direction of the cafe window. This was just a temporary gig for him; he could blast off at a fresh tangent any time he wanted. He had the versatility of a hired hand. They had another bass player, but he was back in Sydney with his new wife and a baby on the way, and it wasn't likely he'd rejoin them when they got back to Australia in a couple of months time. Everything was just going to shit. They already had one album out on a small Australian label, but they all knew England was the place to make the big break, the place you had to go to like some kind of pilgrimage to have almost any chance of making it in the music business. This was the kind of shit that could break a band. A copy of the *New Musical Express* lay on the formica-topped table between them. There was a review of what they all considered one of their more successful gigs at the Town & Country. The reviewer had slated them, calling them a bunch of talentless neo-punks who ought to fuck off right back where they came from. Edison looked as if he was about to be sick.

"I don't understand it," muttered Harry, staring at the English rain drizzling against the glass. Cold. It was so much colder than back home in Australia. "I just don't get it. It's like they want to massacre us almost before they've had a chance to listen to us."

Bunzie sighed. "Oh, I get it all right, no problem." He looked sharply at Jack. "The problem is politics. The gig last night would have gone just fine if you'd managed to keep your mouth shut during that interview the band did. The way things are just now, none of the majors are going to touch a band that's politically hot to handle."

Jack kept his voice calm and level. "I only speak what I think. I don't know, Bunzie. What do you think?" The sarcasm was heavy in his voice. "I mean, does anyone actually think any more? Or hasn't anyone noticed what the hell's going on in the world these days?" He looked accusingly at Harry, but Harry was still too tired and still too much in pain from his bruises to say anything. Besides ... there were other ways to fix social problems. All Jack really did was talk about them. On the other hand, he figured Jack was lucky to be alive after diving off the stage like that. At the very least, it could have meant brain damage. But then, with Jack it might not be so easy to tell the difference.

Bunzie made an exasperated noise, then calmed down and tried another approach. "All right. There are Nazis all over Europe. That bloke, Bert, whatever he's called —"

"Bertillon," Jack corrected. "The one that wants to expel Turks and Jews."

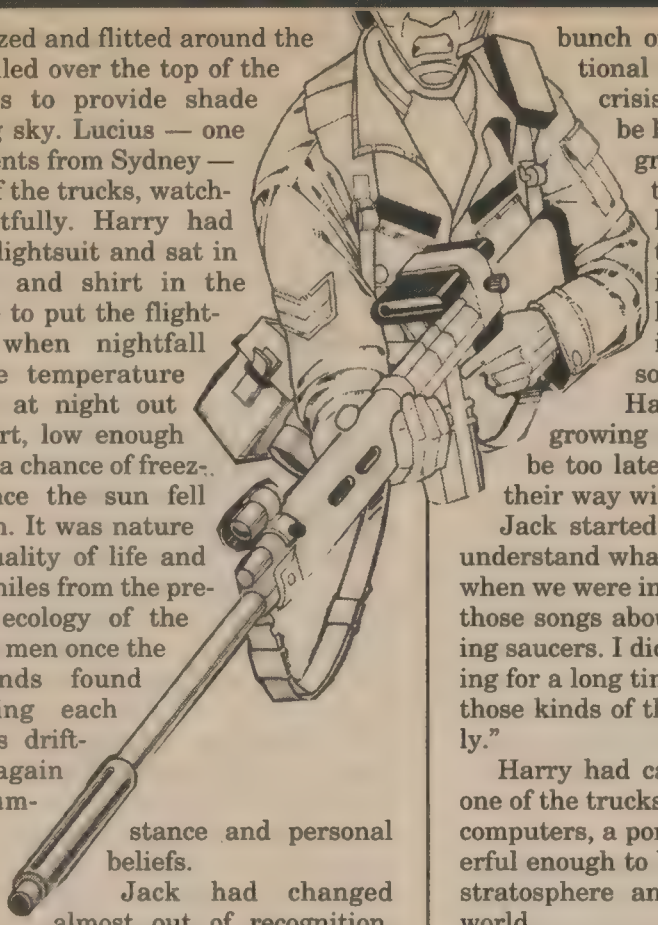
"Yeah, Bertillon, he's in power in France now, but since when did rock 'n 'roll ever change a thing?" Jack didn't answer. "I mean, just tell me, if you want to do something about the fucking Nazis, what the hell are you doing in a band?"

Jack looked troubled, and Harry suddenly felt sorry for him. It wasn't that he didn't care, it was just that it wasn't as intense for him as it seemed to be for Jack.

"Look. Bunzie. Did you see that form we all had to fill in when we came over here? For Christ's sake, did you see some of the questions it was asking!" He didn't need to specify; they all knew what he meant. The form had asked if they had any non-Caucasians in their families. Other questions, like whether any of them ever voted for political parties or organisations that leaned towards the Left. Questions whose only real intention was to intimidate. "I had to lie, for Christ's sake. My grandmother is Aboriginal, on my father's side. Like that's any of their fucking business!" He was getting loud now, and Bunzie put up his hands to forestall any further argument.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. Okay? It's just that —" he sighed, and his shoulders dropped so it seemed that he had shrunk somehow. There was a uniform silence for a few minutes, broken only by the tinny Muzak drifting out of some hidden speaker. "There are other record companies, other opportunities. It's not over yet."

Six months later the band broke up.



Insects buzzed and flitted around the canvas pulled over the top of the two trucks to provide shade from the burning sky. Lucius — one of Jack's ex-students from Sydney — sat against one of the trucks, watching him distrustfully. Harry had stripped off his flightsuit and sat in wrinkled slacks and shirt in the shade. He'd have to put the flightsuit back on when nightfall approached. The temperature dropped sharply at night out here in the desert, low enough that a man stood a chance of freezing to death once the sun fell below the horizon. It was nature in the raw, a duality of life and death, a million miles from the precisely balanced ecology of the orbitals. And two men once the closest of friends found themselves facing each other, their lives drifting together again through circumstance and personal beliefs.

Jack had changed almost out of recognition. After the band had split, Jack had gone back to University in Australia, while Europe and America crumbled into political chaos.

"I did some teaching for a while, tried to pretend the changes weren't happening. Then the government here started putting pressure on the Aboriginals, squeezing them even further out of their rights. My degree was in business. I resigned from the University when they started refusing entry to Aboriginals and used my business knowledge to get into finance. I did pretty well.

"That all ended after the Tokyo Earthquake in '06," said Jack, opening a tin of corned beef. "The Tokyo Exchange went down, Wall Street crashed, and I was lucky to get out in one piece. People made and lost fortunes in the half-hour directly after the earthquake. But I'll tell you, I saw it coming." He stared hard at Harry.

"Jack, I don't have much time. I need to talk to you about —"

"Wait 'til I'm finished, and then you can say your piece. Now, listen. It was like a signal to go in another direction again, you know what I mean? I was already into communications technology, as an investor and as an operator. You need to understand the networks to stay afloat in the financial world, like a camel knows where all the oases in the desert are. Do you know it was a bunch of hackers who held the international exchanges together during the crisis? I'm serious. They turned out to be like a big safety net, an enormous grey economy of illicit information that saved Wall Street from swallowing itself whole. It's like I say to people who ask me if I live inside these trucks. I tell them I live inside telephone wires and inside fiber-optic cables. You get some funny looks." He sighed.

Harry could feel his impatience growing by the minute. It might already be too late; other jets might already be on their way with less amicable intent.

Jack started talking again. "I never used to understand what the hell you were singing about when we were in the band together, you know. All those songs about spaceships and aliens and flying saucers. I didn't really get what you were saying for a long time, didn't even really think about those kinds of things until comparatively recently."

Harry had caught a glimpse of the inside of one of the trucks on his way past. State-of-the-art computers, a portable generator that looked powerful enough to boost a radio signal high into the stratosphere and bounce it around the entire world.

"Jack, there isn't much time. You've got to listen to me. I know what you're trying to do, and I don't want you to do it."

Lucius never seemed to take his eyes off him. He couldn't see it from where he was sitting with Jack, but he knew the shotgun would be right within reach.

"I know that," said Jack, chuckling. "What were you thinking, you were going to come here and say hi, how's things, you're under arrest?" Harry started to speak, to say it's not like that, but Jack wouldn't let him speak. "Let me guess. You found out there was a leak, right? Harry, Southern Star's security isn't worth shit up against kids like Lucius." Harry glanced at the kid, who was listening to the conversation; the kid stared back hard. All the atrocities being committed in Africa, the racial abuse that seemed to just keep on growing and growing everywhere, the more Europe and America and Japan and all the rich nations of the previous century slid into recession and bankruptcy ... in Lucius's eyes, Harry was guilty of it all, and more. Harry thought he'd known the answer once, but things had seemed simpler then, more black and white. Now Harry wasn't even sure who he was anymore. Jack was showing him something: a shiny black card with tiny lines of silver cut into its surface. He recognised it and jumped up, horrified.

"Where in hell did you get that?" It was an interface card that granted privileged access to the core computer system on board the Southern Star. It granted access to the heart of a station, and was only supposed to belong to onboard personnel. No one was allowed to leave the station until their card had been handed in and verified. At the very least, Jack's possession of the card meant a massive breach of security.

"Man, oh, man, do you have something to learn. Most of the work on the Star's mainframe was done at Sydney University. Some of us — students, programmers — we introduced some special programming, hardwired into the computers. It recognises us as valid cardholders. We arranged it so that special cards were manufactured just for us.

"All right, if you want to cut out the bullshit, let's get to the point. The Prometheus Code. See this card? The code is encrypted on it. Those trucks are carrying equipment that'll blast the Prometheus Code halfway around the world, through all the computer networks. We don't think it should be such a big secret, Harry. And I can't really believe you do either. Help us," he implored. "Please."

"I'm going to join the Australian Air Force." No reaction. Bunzie and Edison lay sprawled under the California sun. A copy of Harry's new album lay beside Edison, hidden under cigarette papers and spilled tobacco. They were sitting on the lawn behind Bunzie's mansion. Of all of them, it had been their manager, Bunzie, who had made it really, really big, if not in the public eye. He managed some of the biggest recording artists in the world. The ones he didn't manage were on first-name terms with him. Sometimes, Harry thought Bunzie only kept him on his roster of clients out of some dim sense of nostalgia for the good old days. Harry's albums did okay. Not great, but okay. Edison was the only one left from the old band.

"I wondered where you got the haircut," said Edison, eyes large and unfocused.

"Listen, I'm serious. I'm going to join the Air Force."

Bunzie sighed. "You can't join the Air Force. You're going on tour, remember?"

"I can't go on tour. I told you, I'm going to join the Air Force. Now."

Bunzie finally levered his considerable bulk out of the patio chair he'd been sitting in. "I told you, Harry, you can't join the Air Force. You have a new solo album out. You have to promote that album. So the album sells, and maybe you make some money for a change. What the hell do you want to join the Air Force for, anyway?"

"Because it's the best way to get into the astronaut training programme the UN is setting up."

Bunzie and Edison looked at him with blank expressions for maybe three seconds and then burst out laughing. Harry waited. "Look, I'm serious," he said. "I want to go out into space. It's what I've always wanted to do, you know that. Didn't you ever listen to any of the songs?"

Edison couldn't stop giggling. "Yeah, but come on, nobody ever thought you were serious."

"Take it easy, Harry," said Bunzie, who was starting to look genuinely worried. "Joining the Air Force isn't such a good idea. It's not like they're just going to throw you into the nearest space shuttle and yell 'ignition'."

Harry shook his head. "That's not what I mean. I take pilot training. I do a couple of years' active service. Then I apply for astronaut training. Ten, maybe twelve years it'll take me. But it's what I want to do." Harry realised Edison was whistling "Space Oddity" and shot him a sharp glance. Edison shrugged his shoulders and looked away.

"And what're you going to do when you get there? In space, I mean?" Bunzie asked. "Wait for the aliens to turn up?"

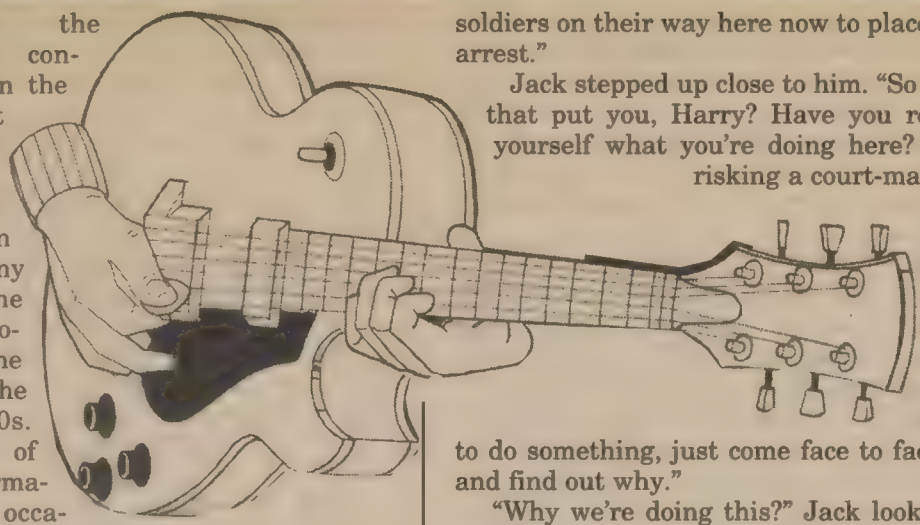
"Yes, maybe." Edison made a disgusted sound, and Harry felt himself beginning to lose his cool. "Jesus, you really don't understand, do you? I'm serious. This is what I want to do. This is what can give my life meaning, and if I don't do it, then I know I'll spend the rest of my life regretting it."

Edison shook his head. "First Jack, now you. I don't understand it. Jesus, will someone please tell me what the hell the world is coming to?"

"Things change, Ed," said Harry. "People change, too, or they might as well be dead."

It was like those years with the band had been some kind of bizarre glitch in their lives, a surreal episode buried in their collective past. And now Harry had forgotten why he did what he did. The music, the studios and the recording sessions, the touring, everything. None of it mattered anymore, because on the grand scale of humanity it amounted to less than nothing. Here lies Harry, he toured with a band called Radio Icarus that, ha, never really took off, and recorded a bunch of mediocre solo albums. Better to get fried by solar radiation or go up blazing in a misfired shuttle launch. That was the way to go out. Here lies Harry. We couldn't find most of the pieces, but we figure his head's halfway to Betelgeuse by now. Yeah. Maybe that was how it had been for Jack, just a bunch of empty, meaningless gestures. Maybe you had to get out while the going was still good.

Hugging the desert contours in the jet had brought back memories of pilot training in the States. In the end he'd been lucky not to see any action during the wars that had broken out across the Third World at the end of the 2010s. He'd spent most of his time on permanent standby, occasionally escorting cargo planes along dangerous flight paths. When it came time to apply for astronaut training, it had been easier than Harry had ever imagined. Right place at the right time. An unmanageable international situation meant orbital surveillance on a massive scale. Most of the time he'd only been required to monitor the movement of toxic waste and rates of ozone depletion, or rendezvous with straying satellites, bringing them in for repair. Riding up and down the world's highways in the back of an unheated van on perpetual tour just didn't compare.



Jack was standing just behind him. "I can't help it. I'm curious. How did you figure it out?"

"It wasn't the interface card. That took me by surprise. It was Kemenides, the Greek astronaut. He told me about it, about working for you. Don't worry, I didn't turn him in." Harry sighed. "I almost thought he was putting me on until he mentioned your name. Your file makes interesting reading, Jack."

Jack shook his head. "This is incredible. What a way to meet again. It must have been destined, Harry." Harry shook his head; he didn't want to hear any of this New Millennium claptrap. "No, I'm serious. Hear me out. Kemenides is a religious man; he believes in this even if you don't. He thinks the Prometheus Code is a message specifically for us, that we were meant to find it when we did. He thinks it's God's will that the Code be given to all humanity. Now, I'm not so religiously inclined, but I agree on principle. This is too hot to be entrusted to any government or organisation who'll just keep it to themselves."

"You know, just mentioning the Code in some places could get you hurt. If you know this much, you might already be a dead man."

"Why, Harry, is that a threat?"

"No. Just one of the realities of life. I think you ought to know your whereabouts is no secret. I just managed to beat the others here; there'll be soldiers on their way here now to place you under arrest."

Jack stepped up close to him. "So where does that put you, Harry? Have you really asked yourself what you're doing here? Aren't you risking a court-martial?"

"Because I owe my past something. When I realised it was you I knew I had to do something, just come face to face with you and find out why."

"Why we're doing this?" Jack looked despairing. "Why do you think we're doing this, for God's sake?"

It could have been one of those Californian deserts where a million low-budget Hollywood Westerns had been filmed. It could have been the Australian Outback, the centre of the continent where the ground is low and flat and dusty red. Except this was neither, and there were no coyotes or kangaroos or bushes or even, strictly speaking, air. And the sand wasn't sand, it was regolith. Martian regolith. Someone had put an aluminium ladder down through the crack in the ground, with lightbulbs strung along a wire. Breath loud in his pressure suit, Harry descended.

The excitement he felt was incredible. When the news had come through, there had been celebration, and someone who knew about Harry's previous career — he had his fans in the Air Force — had started playing "Is There Anyone Out There" from the one Radio Icarus album through the tannoy. It was like having a second Christmas. Then the orders had come through half an hour later that nobody was to talk about it. The staff on board the station immediately split into two halves. Those who wanted to shout the news to the world, and those who believed, as the UN obviously did, that the news should not be made public, at least not immediately. Weeks had stretched into months and no new orders had come through; the lid was being kept tightly sealed.

Michaelson was waiting at the bottom of the ladder. Harry dropped the last four feet with a soft whuff that blew up dust. Michaelson gestured to him, and Harry followed him below the Martian surface.

It was a solitary slab of rock with a flat topside. Down here it was reasonably protected from the dust storms that ravaged the planet surface. "Those marks must originally have been deep."

said Michaelson's voice through his helmet speaker. "They're only an inch or so deep now, but they might have been there for millions of years. I can't even begin to imagine."

Harry was mesmerised. They were marks of intelligence, of incredible otherness. His head began to spin and he put out a hand to steady himself.

Michaelson took hold of his arm. "Steady, there. It gets everybody like that the first time. It's like taking a snapshot of a cafe and realising Jesus Christ, Buddha, and Elvis were sitting at one of the tables when you get it developed."

The Code had been discovered six months previously on a routine mapping expedition passing by Mars South Pole, carved into a flat slab of rock hidden deep in a valley. The general assumption was that a hoax was out of the question; none of the previous exploratory expeditions had come within a thousand miles of the South Pole. Natural causes were also out of the question. Everyone who had seen it first-hand agreed that something intelligent had made the marks.

Shit, thought Harry, filled with the revelation of it all. It's true. It's really true.

"Jack, I can make it easy for *you*. If you hand yourself over to me, I promise—"

"Shut the fuck up!" Harry took a step back, shocked by the outburst. Jack's benevolent smile had disappeared in an instant. "I'm trying to make it easy for you. When it turns out that it's people like you that've been keeping stuff like this under wraps for the past couple of years, it's not gonna be me in the firing line. I've been turned into a second-class citizen because I'm part Aboriginal, and you're talking about promises? Whose side are you on, Harry? Mine or theirs?" He motioned to the boy, who brought his shotgun up to shoulder height and came closer. "Keep that gun on him until he makes a decision," said Jack.

Harry automatically raised his arms to shoulder height. He figured the kid had never shot anyone in his life, but there was always a first time. "If I was that much of a danger to you, I wouldn't have come out here on my own."

"I know what you're saying, Harry, but we didn't come this far to turn back. Point of no return, know what I mean?" Jack shook his head. "I just don't get it. I would have thought you'd be on our side. I would have thought you'd want to help us. It was you who wrote all those songs."

"People change."

"Don't they ever? What exactly did you think was going to happen to that information? I mean, just what were you intending to do with it?"

Harry shrugged. "It's not something that's up to me. I just —"

"Follow orders? That's —" An insistent beeping sound came out of one of the trucks. The boy with the shotgun looked round, alarmed. "There's someone else on their way here, Professor," he said.

Jack gave him a bitter smile. "Friends of yours?"

"I told you it was just a matter of time." Jack looked around, as if he wasn't sure what to do next. "I mean what I said," Harry repeated. "If you leave it up to me, we'll get out of this. Okay?"

"I don't know about that."

Harry sighed. "Look, I understand what you're trying to do, but this isn't the way. The information will be released one day."

The other man barked. "Bullshit. I can't believe you believe that."

Jack was stuck in the past, in some kind of utopian dream. This wasn't the way, not at all. He could see he wasn't the same man he'd known decades before. If information like that leaked, it could be disastrous; Christ only knew what the code contained, a recipe for the ultimate weapon maybe, or something that would have every Christian and Muslim on the face of the planet at each other's throats, something that might contradict fundamental belief systems. If he pulled the right strings he could get Jack through this safely.

He looked at the boy, who still had the shotgun trained on him. "Lucius, right? Look, I'm not going to try anything. You don't need to point that thing at me."

"Don't talk shit, cobber. I know what I'm doing. You should worry; you betrayed your own fucking principles."

"Yeah? Such as?"

"I've heard those albums of yours. Christ, what a copout! I used to listen to them when I was a kid and think, yeah, maybe one day I'll grow up and the aliens will come, or we'll find something, and we won't be alone, and you were lying! It was all bullshit, wasn't it?"

"It was only music," Harry insisted. "That's all. And I was right. They were there. It just is — I don't know what people are going to do once they find out, none of us do. The consequences could be terrible."

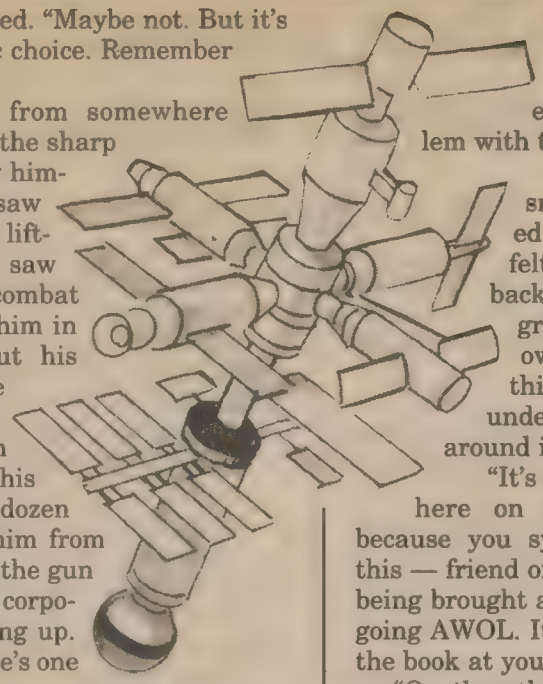
"Terrible for people like you, not so terrible for the rest of us."

Jack was climbing up on top of one of the trucks, manually trying to get the dish in line. The card he'd shown Harry would pass him into the deepest parts of Southern Star, where the Code was stored, releasing it. The station would be passing overhead any minute now.

"So what do you think's going to happen when this gets out? Think things'll be any better? Think everybody's going to link arms and march forward into the future?"

"Maybe," Lucius retorted. "Maybe not. But it's their choice. A democratic choice. Remember words like that?"

There was a sound from somewhere behind him. Harry heard the sharp report of a rifle and flung himself to the ground; he saw Lucius lying near him. He lifted his head slightly and saw men in sand-coloured combat fatigues running toward him in a low crouch. Harry put his hands behind his head. He felt someone grab him by the collar and yank him up; a pistol was shoved in his face. There were maybe a dozen of them. Two men held him from behind, and another held the gun to him. Someone with a corporal's insignia came running up. "Leave him," he yelled. "He's one of ours."



Other men ran to the trucks, searching. Harry ran too, and on the way past he saw the neat round bullet hole in Lucius's forehead. He felt a terrible pang of regret. He'd seen dead bodies before, many times, but this was different. There had been no war here, nothing but a disagreement, a differing of principles.

Jack was in the back of one of the trucks, sitting in front of a laptop hooked up to other equipment. He had his hands clasped on top of his head. His expression was bleak. He saw Harry and turned to him.

"I suppose you win. Are you satisfied?"

Harry said nothing. He felt sick. This wasn't the way things were supposed to be.

"Professor Nady?" said the colonel from behind Harry. "You're under arrest. I'm sorry about the boy."

Jack stared at the corporal and then he realised. "You —" he stuttered, unable to speak. He looked around wildly, then stood up quickly and put his hand on a switch. The corporal brought up his handgun and shot Jack three times in the chest. Harry stared at the twitching corpse in disbelief, then turned to the corporal.

"You — you shot him. I don't understand."

The corporal shrugged. "He was resisting arrest."

Anger boiled up inside Harry like an angry volcano. "You — murderous — bastard. You didn't need to kill him. You didn't need to kill either of them. You weren't going to let either of them walk away from here alive, were you?"

"Of course not. They had access to top secret information. They could sabotage the orbital platforms. Obvious terrorists. That's what my official report will say, at least." The corporal smiled a tight, humourless smile. Harry wondered if he was enjoying this. "Do you have a problem with that?"

Harry swung his fist back, snarling. The corporal's eyes shifted to one of the soldiers, and Harry felt the butt of a rifle impact with the back of his head. He crumpled to the ground. He felt the corporal's shadow fall over him. He could feel something small and flat and smooth under him, and he wrapped his fingers around it.

"It's like this, lieutenant. You came out here on your own initiative, probably because you sympathise with these terrorists, this — friend of yours. That would mean charges being brought against you: endangering security, going AWOL. It wouldn't be hard to really throw the book at you. Know what I mean?

"On the other hand, if you keep your mouth shut, you stay alive and out of jail." Rough hands grabbed at Harry and pulled him up until he was standing. "Comprende? Think of it as a warning. To everyone up there who has ideas about letting that shit get out about aliens. That information remains restricted for as long as required. Now, come on. Let's get out of here."

They pulled him along, and he walked like a zombie, like none of it was real. Dead. Jack was dead. Like his past, everything he used to be, dead, all dead, all worthless and used up and thrown away and left to rot in the Australian sun. They'd come in on trucks hidden behind a low rise in the desert floor. No wonder they hadn't seen them; Jack and Lucius had never stood a chance. He stared at the jet, sitting gleaming in the sun, and an image came to him of wax feathers fluttering to the ground. Someone was getting inside it, probably to fly it back to the base. He sat in the back of a truck and let himself be jerked about by its motion over the rough ground.

No one was watching him; he slipped one hand inside his pocket and felt the smooth surface of the interface card, the extra one Jack had had manufactured. It was all in there. He could do something.

All he had to do was make the choice. ❑

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Jack's Hand

By Stephen Woodworth

Art by Beryl Bush

Jack Harmon turned restlessly in his bed. Some petty discomfort was trying to wake him. He half-opened his eyes to the pitch-black of the bedroom.

His right hand was cold.

He tucked his arm farther under the blanket and tried to nestle back into sleep. It didn't work.

Then he remembered.

Sitting bolt upright, he yanked the covers off his body with his left hand and switched on the lamp. There, bared to the lamp's dusky yellow light, was the stump of his right arm, still neatly wrapped in its shroud of gauze.

And there, in the empty air where his hand should have been, he felt cold, moist flesh. The emptiness clenched and unclenched at his command.

"Jack, what's wrong?" his wife Peggy asked, her voice hoarse from sleep. She shifted to avoid waking the baby between them. "Was it a dream?"

He didn't answer. Shaking all over, he jumped out of bed and sprinted, barefoot and in his pajamas, out of the bedroom and through the connecting door between the house and the garage. He turned on the fluorescent lights over his workbench, sat on the wooden stool beside it, and unwrapped the gauze on the stump.

Then he grabbed a heavy wooden mallet off the bench and began hammering the exposed wound again and again, muttering, "It's not real ... it's not real ... it's not real ..."

"I'm sorry, it's out of the question," Dr. Kiel said.

Jack rolled his cigarette between the fingers of his left hand. "Why?"

"I don't want to end up in a malpractice suit."

"I'll sign a release."

"Won't save my ass in court if you change your mind." Kiel leaned forward. "Jack, when it comes time for a prosthetic limb, part of an arm is better than none."

Jack chuckled mirthlessly and exhaled smoke. "Yeah, right."

"Look, this 'phantom hand' you have is a common experience among amputees. Your mind projects sensations where it thinks a hand should be. Give it time — it'll pass."

"Sure." Jack rose to leave.

"Anything else I can do for you? Some painkillers maybe?"

Jack smiled as he thought of the mallet and shook his head.

"Well, then, I guess I'll see you next week." Kiel crossed the room to hold the door open for him, as if for an invalid.

Jack took another drag on his cigarette. "It never did bleed, did it?"

"What?"

"The wound. It never bled."

"Oh." Kiel waved the smoke out of his face. "Well, it wasn't your everyday accident, was it?"

"You can say that again, Doc," Jack replied, flicking his ash on Kiel's floor as he left.

Peggy waited for him out in the Toyota with Jennifer, their daughter, asleep in a safety seat in the back. They'd bought the car just before the accident, and it was a stick shift. Jack still had to restrain himself from going to the driver's side to get in.

"Hey!" Peggy flipped her long red hair back over her shoulder and smiled at Jack as he slid into the passenger's seat. "What did he have to say?"

"Nothing." He slammed the door.

Peggy's smile faded, and she started the car. As they left White Sands and headed back to Las Cruces, Jack gazed out the window at the missile models arrayed at the base's entrance, obsolete monuments to the arms race.

His invisible right hand closed into a fist.

Jack reread the passage in the book on his lap, then looked down at his stump as it rested on the page. And felt fingers curl where no fingers existed.

Clay. Moist, smooth. It pressed up under his fingernails as he clawed the alien soil ...

Peggy came into the living room carrying the baby. "Babe, could you watch Jenny while I start dinner?"

Startled, Jack tried to slip the book between the cushion and arm of the sofa. "Sure."

Peggy put Jennifer in her crib, then crossed over to him. She stroked his hair. "You okay?"

"Oh, yeah. Hunky-dory."

Frowning at the edge in his voice, she glanced down at the book beside him. "Whatcha readin'?"

Jack sighed and held it up for her to see.

"*Holes in Space*. A new field for you?"

"No, I read it in college. I ... thought I might

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teach a class."

Her face brightened. "That's great! A new job is just what you need."

"Well, we'll see."

The baby began to cry.

"Uh-oh," Peggy giggled, "I think somebody needs to be changed."

Jack followed her to the crib. "I can do that."

"You sure?"

He nodded.

"Okay." She moved toward the kitchen, but lingered at the door as he removed Jennifer's old diaper.

The baby's sobs grew louder.

"Shh. Please, honey, just lie still," Jack murmured. He tried to put on the new diaper with his left hand, but couldn't hold it closed long enough to fasten it.

Peggy stepped up beside him. "Here, babe, let me —"

"I can do it!" Jack snapped.

She shied back. "Okay. You don't have to shout."

Jack fumbled a few seconds more, then turned away in frustration, cursing under his breath.

Peggy quietly finished for him. "You're too hard on yourself. You can't expect to do everything right away."

Jack stood with his back to her. "I can't expect to take care of my own daughter, you mean. Or drive my own car."

"You *will*. Once you get used to —"

"'Get used to it!'" He laughed hollowly. "You don't get it. It's not just that I lost my job. It's not just that I can't even change a fucking diaper. It's ... I ..."

She came over and put her arms around him. "I know. I know."

He hugged her tightly. "Peg," he whispered, "I'm scared."

She touched a finger to his lips to shush him, then kissed him. He stopped trembling and returned the kiss, then ran the fingertips of his left hand along the soft skin of her cheek. For a moment, he forgot that he only had one hand, and he lifted his stump as if to cradle her face in his palms. Just as it touched her chin, the stump tingled.

No, not the stump — the hand.

Tiny, pin-prick sensations that raised the hair all the way up his right arm. Almost like ...

Jack flinched and jerked away from Peggy.

"Jack, what's wrong?"

He swallowed hard, closed his eyes, and pictured the hand in his mind. He made it twitch. The tingling skittered away.

Jack gasped. He made the hand search its immediate surroundings. Dirt, dirt, dirt, it said, and then ...

... vibrating, hair-thin antennae, a head the size of an orange, many spider-like legs, a soft, chitinous dome over its body. It scuttled out of his reach. His fingers danced in emptiness.

Then the serrated mandibles tore into the tender flesh of his palm ...

Jack let out a yell as the pain shot through him. He doubled over and dropped to his knees.

"Jack, what is it?"

Whimpering, he tried to bat the thing away. Warm liquid seeped from the wound and dripped down his life-line. The thing bit again, taking off the tip of his ring finger. He clamped his jaw shut against the agony and grabbed the thing's head, digging his fingers into the pulp of its neck. Mandibles nipped at skin, head squirmed and throbbed, legs scrambled for purchase.

"All right," Jack hissed, "let's see how *you* like it."

Then he *squeezed*.

He could almost hear it squeal.

The sides of its head crumpled inward like an aluminum can. He increased the pressure until the head burst, smearing his hand with viscous pus. The thing's body twitched. Twitched. And lay still.

Jack screamed.

He sat with his eyes closed for a long time, hunched over in a fetal position. When he looked up, he saw Peggy holding the phone's receiver to her ear as someone at the other end squeaked madly for information.

They hadn't spoken to each other for over fifteen minutes. Jack huddled on the sofa, shivering. Peggy sat beside him, her face drawn, and rubbed his back with her hand. He was calm enough now so that he didn't flinch when she touched him.

The doorbell rang, and Peggy rose to answer it. Her voice drifted to him from the front door. "Phil, I'm so glad you're here."

"I left as soon as you called. Is he okay?"

"He's still pretty shaken up."

"Another hallucination, eh?"

She sniffed and cleared her throat. "I think you'd better talk to him yourself."

Jack's gaze remained distant as Peggy brought Phil into the living room.

"Jack?" The sofa sagged under Phil's portly bulk as he sat down. "Hey, cowboy, how's it going?"

Jack stared straight ahead. "You don't need to patronize me, Cooper. I'm crazy, not stupid."

Phil forced a chuckle. "So ... what happened tonight?"

"I had a 'hallucination.' Isn't that how you put it?"

Phil grimaced. "And what do you think it was?"

Jack looked up at Peggy. She fingered a strand of her hair, sucking on the tip she put in her mouth, a habit she'd given up years ago. Her eyes glistened with worry.

Jack shook his head. "I don't know, Coop. I really don't."

"Yes, he does," Peggy said. "Tell him, Jack."

Surprised, he met her steady gaze. "My hand," he told Phil. "It isn't gone."

Phil rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Jack, we've been through this ..."

"*Listen* to him," Peggy said.

"I'm sorry, but I was there! I saw his hand get blown off, okay?"

"Did you?" Jack asked.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, did you actually see the beam fire?"

Cooper sighed. "You know as well as I do that it would only take a split second to —"

"And you know as well as I do that that's complete bullshit!" Jack's voice began to rise. "There were a hundred different fail-safes on that beam. We *shut down* the entire system a week before we went into the test chamber. The accelerator was cold — no power. You want to tell me it worked itself up to a few billion electron-volts in the split second I had my hand in its sights?"

Phil shrugged. "Stranger things have happened. It was the first weapon of its kind."

"Oh yeah? What about the blood?"

"What blood?"

"Exactly. There was none. Why didn't I bleed?"

"Jack, that beam could cauterize your neck before your head hit the floor."

"Look." Jack stood and uncoiled the bandage from the stump, then held it up for Cooper's inspection. "Does this look cauterized to you?"

It didn't. It looked like a living CAT-scan cross-section of a human wrist, glistening red, veins throbbing with fluid that seemed about to spurt all over the carpet. Two pinkish circles of bone marked the position of the ulna and radius. Phil paled, and Peggy shut her eyes.

Jack spoke haltingly, emphasizing each word. "It didn't bleed because it was never *cut*. Do you understand now?"

Cooper shook his head, still gazing at the yawning wound.

"That beam. Somehow, when we fired it, it made a hole."

"What?"

"A hole!" Jack snatched the book from the sofa and waved it in Phil's face. "A hole in *space*. An Einstein-Rosen bridge. I must've got my hand caught in it while reaching down to fix the target plate."

"No ... this is just ... nuts —"

"But it makes sense, don't you see? That's why I didn't feel any pain when it happened. It was more like my hand was being squeezed from all sides ... like I'd put it in a glove that kept shrinking. All of a sudden it went cold and numb." He paused, a fearful, faraway look in his eyes. "And I started to feel those ... things."

"It's just a bunch of nerves fucking with your mind!"

"Coop, there are *bugs eating my hand*," Jack said, an edge of hysteria in his voice.

Phil averted his eyes from the bloody stump, and his gaze fell on Peggy. "And you believe this?"

"He was fighting something," she said softly. "I know that."

"I've got to get back into the lab," Jack continued, wrapping the stump again. "Maybe, if I reverse the beam's field somehow —"

Phil shook his head. "No. Even if I wanted to —"

"Coop, I need you. They revoked my security clearance."

"I can't. Jack, *there is no beam anymore*."

Jack froze. "What?"

"I thought you knew. Defense cuts. The Pentagon axed our program."

Jack's eyes fogged. He sank back down on the sofa.

"There must be something you can do," Peggy insisted.

"No! They switched me to missile guidance. I'm lucky I still have a job —" He cast a guilty glance at Jack. "I'm sorry."

Lost in thought, Jack didn't respond. "Then we'll have to cut it off," he said at last. "Cut it off and bury it."

"Jack!" Peggy glared at him in shock.

Phil's jaw dropped, doubling his chin. "What the hell —?"

"What if those things come through, Coop? I'm like the kid with his finger in the dike. We have to cut the hole off and bury it. Besides," he added, "this arm isn't much good as it is ..."

"Whoa, there, cowboy!" Cooper interrupted nervously. "Before you start cutting things off, let's ... go out to the lab in the morning and see what we can do. I'll call Sue and tell her I'm spending the night here."

Peggy gave a wan smile. "Thanks." She glanced around the living room and chuckled. "We weren't really expecting a guest ..."

"Oh, this couch seems pretty comfy." Phil turned to Jack. "How 'bout it, cowboy?"

The shadow of a grin crossed Jack's face. "Okay." He held out his left hand. "The Bobbsey Twins, together again."

Phil beamed, cheeks dimpling. "My man!" He slapped Jack's upturned palm.

It rained that night. Lightning split the sky, and thunder rolled across the landscape.

Jack lay in a deep, dreamless sleep, overcome by physical and emotional exhaustion, and so he didn't feel the first gentle tug at his arm. Another pull, sharper this time. He grumbled slightly. "Peg?"

The next tug almost yanked him off the bed.

Terror surged through him like an electric current. His right arm hung straight out over the edge of the bed, taut and tense. Without even switching on the lamp, Jack knew.

It must have come for the dead beetle-thing. Having finished with that, it had found a strange, five-legged creature nearby. Out of curiosity and hunger, the new thing had coiled a thick, rubbery tentacle around Jack's hand to draw it in. Suckers the size of quarters pulsed and oozed on his skin.

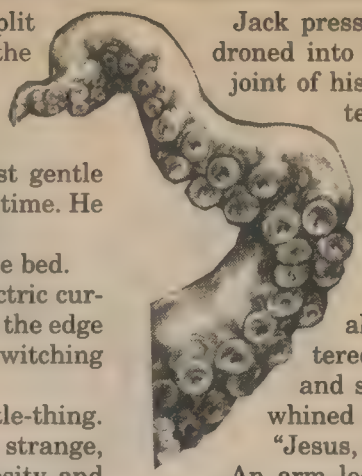
It was much stronger than the beetle-thing.

His arm jerked again.

"Did you feel that?" Peggy asked groggily. "Jack —?"

Jack ran for the garage, sprinting past Cooper, who still snored on the couch. Lurching and veering with each jerk on his arm, he staggered through the connecting door, flicked on the lights, and grabbed what he needed off the work bench.

The circular saw.



Jack pressed the start button, and the saw droned into action. He held it just above the joint of his right elbow, then hesitated. The teeth of the blade fanned his skin.

Another pull on the stump, so hard this time that he had to brace himself against the bench to keep from falling over.

He lowered the saw.

For a moment, pain obliterated all conscious thought. Blood spattered his pajamas. His vision dimmed and shimmered. The saw hit bone and whined to a halt.

"Jesus, Jack!"

An arm locked around his neck in a choke hold, while a hand gripped his left arm and tried to wrest the saw from his grasp. Dimly, Jack heard Peggy scream. He squirmed and twisted. "No! I've got to! *It's trying to pull me through!*"

Phil tore the saw free of the cut, while Peggy yanked the plug from the socket.

"No!" Jack yelled as he watched the red blade spin and slow.

He blinked, tears and blood in his eyes, then realized that, sometime during the tug-of-war with Phil, the thing had become frustrated with its stubborn prey and let go.

Relieved yet frightened, Jack sank, weeping,

A Long Time Ago ...

Before taking charge at *Aboriginal Science Fiction*, our editor, Charles C. Ryan, was the editor of *Galileo*, a science fiction magazine published in the mid-1970s. During his tenure there, he helped discover a number of new writers who have since gone on to win Nebula and/or Hugo awards, such as Connie Willis, John Kessel, Lewis Shiner, and more.

For a limited time, while copies last, you can purchase a first-edition hardcover copy of *Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo* for $10, plus $2 postage and handling. (Please allow 6-8 weeks for delivery.) If you would like your copy autographed by the editor, please indicate how you would like the note to read.

Starry Messenger: The Best of Galileo (St. Martin's Press, 1979) features 12 stories by the following authors:

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Brian Aldiss
Alan Dean Foster
Connie Willis
John Kessel
Kevin O'Donnell Jr.
D.C. Poyer
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into Phil's arms.

Tight nylon straps held Jack fast to the hospital bed. His arm was neatly bandaged, a clear tube connecting it to the I.V. bag dangling above. He rolled his eyes, but the lids refused to open.

" ... no ... no ... must stop ..."

"I know. I'll take care of it," a concerned voice whispered. Lips touched his forehead in a kiss. A moment later, a door eased shut, and Jack was alone.

Out in the hospital corridor, Peggy ran to catch up with Dr. Kiel, who waited in the lobby with Phil. The matronly nurse who'd offered to watch Jenny sat nearby, playing peekaboo with the baby. Kiel poured coffee for Peggy, Cooper, and himself, but he was the only one who drank any of it.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Harmon," Kiel began. "If I'd had any idea —"

"My husband wants his arm amputated," Peggy announced, her eyes glassy. "Now."

Her determination left Kiel nonplussed for a moment. He coughed. "Mrs. Harmon, I know both you and your husband have been through a lot ..."

"Tell him, Phil."

Phil looked at the floor, avoiding her gaze. "Peggy, I don't —"

"You felt it, didn't you? You know you weren't just struggling with Jack. Now, *tell him!*"

"He was crazy! Crazy people are strong —"

A piercing shriek resounded through the hall. Kiel dropped his coffee as they all ran to Jack's room.

Inside, they found the bed empty, the straps broken and frayed. The I.V. rack had fallen to the floor, and the bag leaked its contents into a small pile of torn bandages there.

"Check the rest of the ward!" Kiel commanded. "He can't've gotten far." He rushed out the door without waiting for their response.

Phil and Peggy lagged behind. Peggy whimpered as she glanced around the vacant room. Her eyes widened as they fixed upon a point close to the floor.

Phil followed her gaze. "Jesus God —"

A trembling left hand clung, white-knuckled, to the frame of the bed.

Peggy lunged forward.

The hand slid, lost its grip. Peggy snatched at it as it writhed in the air. Its fingers brushed her palm, then it vanished altogether.

"No ..." Peggy dropped to her knees and stared at the empty space where the hand had been. "No no no no *no!*"

As Phil knelt to put an arm around her shoulders, Peggy pressed her hands to her face and sobbed. ❑

A Blaster-bolt's No Way to Say Good-Bye

(A Country & Western song from the era of Cyberspace)

By Geoffrey A. Landis

I met her near Poughkeepsie bussing tables;
and I still can see those sprayed-on jeans she wore;
She was shooting dice and drinkin' in the starlight,
and I knew I'd never been in love before.
I promised her I'd stand by her forever;
she whispered that my kisses made her cry;
So who'd have guessed she'd ditch me for a trucker?
She left and never even waved "goodbye."

I met her in the men's room killing ferrets;
and I still recall that bullwhip that she wore;
She was tied in leather bondage when I shot her,
'cause I knew her taste in lingerie was poor.
My hormones urged I'd jump her bones forever;
she said to me she was a private eye;
How could I know she'd go bad snorting aspirin?
She tied me up and closed the door "goodbye".

I met her off Antares breathing methane;
I was captured by the blaster that she wore;
She was floating kind of weightless in a space-suit
and I knew she was in the mercenary corps.
Her sarge said I'd just clean latrines forever;
she told me heavy weapons made her high.
Then who'd have thought she'd warp out into hyper?
She took the Pluto ship and pulsed "goodbye".

I met her in Cyberspace hacking UNIX;
and I still recall the mirrorshades she wore;
She was chased by cyborg pirates wired for data,
and I learned right then what cyberspace was for.
The sysop sneered I'd just play games forever;
she boldly said she never planned to die;
But who'd have known she'd scramble all my software?
'Cause CyberPunks aren't wired for "goodbye".

I met her in a time-warp traveling backwards;
and I still recall that hologram she wore;
She was chasing pterodactyls in a glider,
and I saw that she could tame a dinosaur.
Her robot said I'd lick her toes forever;
she smiled and said she liked my fractal tie;
How could I guess she'd jaunt off to the ice-age?
But with a time machine, you never say "goodbye".

Disney leads off the 2000s

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***Fantasia 2000* is a whale of a movie ...**

At least three variations of the same speech this week on TV: that 2000 is the tail-end of the Twentieth Century (foxtail?). Stanley Kubrick could've told you, the new millennium does not begin until 2001. Nevertheless, everywhere you turn, there are *fin de siécle* movies about disasters like the great computer meltdown or Arnold Schwarzenegger battling Satan in *End of Days*. This is nothing new; the Victorians feared tumult and disaster as the Nineteenth Century waned. Walt Disney Studios, predictably more sanguine about the calendar turn-over, is ushering in the 2000s with two upbeat genre films: *Fantasia 2000* and *Bicentennial Man*.

The latter, filmed in conjunction with 1492 Productions, is all about a "special" robot who yearns for a heart (and other working organs). Based on a short story by Isaac Asimov, its gentle plot inevitably reminds one of the Tin Man of *Oz*: a debt humorously acknowledged when one of the film's robots sings a bit of Jack Haley's famous solo.

Though Brent Spiner has already masterfully explored the poignancy of a machine yearning to be human, it takes nothing away from his memorable portrayal of *Star Trek*'s Data to compliment Robin Williams for a first-rate interpretation of Andrew, the "bicentennial" android with positronically-generated creative and, ultimately, emotional powers. His performance, which dominates *Bicentennial Man*, is supported by an excellent cast and impressive special effects, which include a whimsically dazzling light-show that explains Isaac's Three Laws of Robotics.

To be picky, the pacing of the necessarily episodic plot slows down a bit in the last half-hour, and the very end of the film (eerily reminiscent of John Boorman's *Zardoz* [1974]) implies a violation of the First Law of Robotics. Nevertheless, *Bicentennial Man* is a well-crafted, mature science fiction film, one that I think might have made Isaac proud.

Fantasia 2000 is the other big Disney release, and it IS big, as

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it is being released exclusively in gigantic IMAX; the first feature-length movie to be shown in the colossal cinema process. Presumably, eventually prints will be produced for showing on smaller screens, but no imminent plans are being announced by the studio.

Roy E. Disney, executive producer and son of Walt's brother Roy, began working on *Fantasia Continued*, as it was first called, in 1991. It had always been Uncle Walt's intention to revise Fantasia and rerelease it with a mixture of old and new contents, and this plan has been preserved in the new edition. One sequence from the original *Fantasia* has been retained, Paul Dukas's "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," starring Mickey Mouse, but unlike the rerelease several years ago, which featured a newly recorded sound track, the studio has wisely chosen to go back to the 1940 original, conducted by the flamboyant Leopold Stokowski, the Leonard Bernstein of his day (if you ask me who Bernstein was, I'll hit you, junior!). Both the opticals and the sound track have been restored for the IMAX version.

The rest of the *Fantasia 2000* concert program is new, beginning with a three-minute version of the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth. Its abstract treatment mirrors the original film's opening, Bach's D Minor Toccata and Fugue, which has always been my favorite segment of *Fantasia*, and, as it turns out, likewise for Pixote Hunt, Disney's art director for the Beethoven 5th sequence. The other compositions, performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by the controversial James Levine, include versions of Respighi's "The Pines of Rome," Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," part of Shostakovich's 2nd Piano Concerto, the finale of Saint-Saëns's "Carnival of the Animals," a musical arrangement by Peter (PDQ Bach) Schickele of portions of Elgar's first four "Pomp and Circumstance" marches, and the 1919 version of Stravinsky's "Firebird Suite." The 1940 Fantasia has a single host between sequences, musicologist Deems Taylor, but the millennial edition has seven besides conductor Levine: James Earl Jones, Quincy Jones, Angela Lansbury, Steve Martin, Bette Midler, Itzhak Perlman, and Penn & Teller (I know that makes eight, but only one of those guys talks).

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Available only at an IMAX theater

The animation for the new sequences of *Fantasia 2000* is very much in the style of the original film: flying whales instead of Roman pines; Shostakovich's piano concerto used as background music for Hans Christian Andersen's tale of "The Steadfast Tin Soldier"; flamingos with yo-yos in the Saint-Saëns composition (analogous to the humorous hippo-crocodile ballet in the 1940 film's "Dance of the Hours," a sequence dear to Pogo fans because Walt Kelly was one of the animators, and that's why those crocs resemble Albert the Alligator!), and a death-and-rebirth Stravinsky finale that features a mystical Elk and Sprite.

Perhaps the most imaginative single sequence is the Gershwin Rhapsody, designed as a love letter to New York and

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It still has a sense of fun ...

"The Others" practice their *Sixth Sense*

patterned on the legendary caricatures of Al Hirschfeld, who, at 96, happily gave Disney permission to go ahead with the sequence.

Now that the first *Fantasia* has been hailed as the groundbreaking film it was, the new edition probably will not offend quite so many critics, though it is still game for the old charge that it chops up music as enhancements to visuals, and in so doing, does a disservice to the original composers.

True, the Disney studio reported that when Igor Stravinsky screened the dinosaur-riddled adaptation of his "Rite of Spring" in the old film, he bemusedly remarked that it must have been what he meant, after all, but what he actually appears to have said was that it was a musical botch job, and badly conducted. On the other hand, the studio points out that sixteen days after the Russian musical genius watched "Rite of Spring," he sold Walt an option to do "The Firebird."

Maybe Stravinsky just needed the money, and maybe that was also a factor in James Levine agreeing to boil down the opening Allegro of Beethoven's 5th to three minutes, but that really is not the point of *Fantasia 2000*. Peter Schneider, president of the Disney studios, says the original film "demystified what classical music was. I think *Fantasia 2000* will once again bring classical music to audiences that are not used to listening to it."

Art for the masses, à la Disney, and why not? My only reservation about the 1940s version is that it was tepid compared with the marvelous 1945 Disney film, *The Three Caballeros*, still one of the most startling examples of imaginative animation in cinematic history (the last sequence has one visual that I believe must have inspired Monty Python).

Caballeros is partly successful because it stars Donald Duck, that "bit" player who went on to upstage Mickey. Happily, Donald has been given his own sequence in *Fantasia 2000*, the Elgar marches, used as background for the story of Noah's Ark, with Donald as one of its builders. Daisy's there, too, as love interest. Quack!

Speaking of Disney and giant reptiles, *Dinosaur* is an animated feature in production, with a tentative release date in May. It is the story of a three-ton iguanodon named Aladar, who defies his leader by protecting herd members unable to keep up with the rest of the herd's rush to save itself from natural disasters. Featuring the voices of Max Casella, Ossie Davis, Julianna Margulies, Joan Plowright, Della Reese, D. B. Sweeney, and Alfre Woodard, *Dinosaur* reportedly boasts computer animation that will surpass the effects in the *Jurassic Park* films.

No release dates have been announced as of this writing for two interesting-sounding films that reportedly have been completed: *The Beach*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, and *Pitch Black*, also known as *Total Eclipse*. The latter, from USA Films, is about survivors of a damaged spaceship trapped on a sun-drenched world populated by savage critters that only come out at night — but an eclipse is in the offing. The odd premise of *The Beach*, which is based on a book by Alex Garland, is that a madman gives a drifter (DiCaprio) a map that will allegedly lead him to Paradise.

In the works: a "fun" cast reportedly will distinguish *Space Cowboys*, a Clint Eastwood film (he's producing, directing and starring) in which a 60-year-old astronaut is asked by NASA to repair a satellite from the 1960s that has become damaged and will cause great destruction as it reenters Earth's atmosphere. Sure, he says, provided that he can go up there with three of his buddies, test pilots bypassed by NASA in the good ol' days. And here's the line-up: James Garner, Tommy Lee Jones, and Donald Sutherland. Reportedly, filming (with cooperation from Houston Space Center) began in early August.

Kevin Bacon and Elisabeth Shue have been announced to star in Columbia Pictures's *The Hollow Man*, based on a story by Douglas Wick about scientists who discover invisibility and try it out on one of their group, who, unfortunately, begins to go insane. (Hmm, wasn't there this old movie with Claude Rains ...?) Paul Verhoeven has been named to direct, which is a bit of good and bad news; he's done some interesting SF work in the past (especially *Starship Troopers*), but he overdoes over-the-top violence.

Next time you go on line, you might want to log on to www.hideaway.demon.co.uk/foiled.html, and read all about the efforts of Foil Productions to earn enough pounds sterling to make *Foiled*, an homage to "cheesy sci-fi B movies" in which four students sharing a house in Manchester, England, are disturbed one evening when their pizza-delivery man is attacked by aliens from space. The production company consists of a group of independent filmmakers working on their weekends off. The rest of the time, they lamented, "we've all got day jobs."

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Disney's *Mission to Mars* lands in March

The Digger's Game:

Lately I've been doing some book research on Burke and Hare, generally thought of as Scottish grave robbers who worked for the Edinburgh anatomist Dr. Robert Knox. Actually, they were Irish: Ulstermen who came to work on the Union Canal. And an Edinburgh tour guide once told me that they weren't grave robbers at all — "they couldna get into t' union" — they were murderers.

Burke and Hare indirectly inspired a classic you may wish to rent on an appropriately dark and rainy night — Val Lewton's 1945 *The Body Snatcher*, based on a story by Robert Louis Stevenson and starring Henry Daniell, Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi. This intelligently-scripted film stands the test of time, and has a shivery final reel.

An early (1959) Hammer film, *The Flesh and the Fiends* (released in a cut version as Mania), stars Peter Cushing as the anatomist Knox, George Rose as Burke, and Donald Pleasence as Hare. Obviously well acted, it is also memorably gruesome, and has two of the most hideous murder scenes ever filmed.

Also on the agenda for release in February is a DreamWorks presentation called "The Others," which mimics the psychic ability shown by the little boy in last summer's hit, *Sixth Sense*.

The NBC TV version employs a group of characters with the ability to sense emanations from the other side who use that skill to help release souls to their final rest and comfort those still living.

The two preview episodes released appeared to go for emotional melodrama rather than any real horror.

March will offer the first of two major films about the exploration of Mars with the release of Disney's *Mission to Mars*, a film indebted in part to Stanley Kubrick's *2001* for some of its visual effects. ❑

Pratchett's ratchet

Faded Steel Heat
By Glen Cook
Roc, 1999
356 pp., $6.99

It's another book about Garrett, the hardboiled detective in Fantasyland. *Faded Steel Heat* is sort of a middling specimen of the genre. It's neither entirely routine, nor is it one of the best.

The plot has a very nice touch: the long Karantine War in the Cantab (the background to the whole series until now) is over, and discharged veterans are flood-

ing back to TunFaire and mostly finding themselves out of work. Predictably, some band together in racist groups that aim to push out the hordes of non-humans who settled in TunFaire during the fifty-year war and took jobs that had gone begging for lack of humans to fill them. Besides them, there are the usual assortment of people and organizations trying to use the situation to get ahead.

Garrett is hired simultaneously by all sides to sort out several intertwined plots. If the book suffers from anything (other than the entire series' bathos of a hardboiled detective, complete with mid-20th Century attitudes, living in Fantasyland surrounded by elves, gods, and trolls) it's from the complexity of the plot, which frequently left me as confused as it did Garrett.

Still it was a fun read.
Rating: ☆☆☆

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

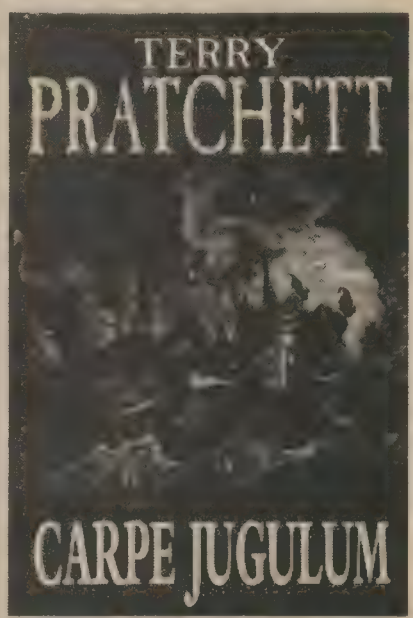
Carpe Jugulum
By Terry Pratchett
HarperCollins, 1998
296 pp., $24.00

The 23rd (honest!) Discworld novel is one of the best. Like all the best Discworld books, it combines Pratchett's humor, mixed-up mythology, and some serious issues.

Vampires from the near-by country of Überwald have invaded Lancre, and Granny Weatherwax and Nanny Ogg have to set it right. The vampires are powerful — the leader, Count Magpyr, is a modernist who has concluded that vampires' aversion to garlic, sunlight, holy symbols, and the like is in the nature of a built-in neurosis, and consequently can be countered. This makes him very powerful and very dangerous. (Particularly to his family, since he's got a bunch of flash cards with every religious symbol in the Discworld, which he shows them at random intervals to build up their resistance to holy symbols.)

His modern turn of mind shows in his utilitarian point of view. He seeks to milk (not the right word, actually) the people of his domain as completely as he can without killing them. Being successful at that, he plot to control neighboring countries like Lancre. Think of it as taking a good, old-fashioned horror, and modernizing it and making it efficient.

Other characters include a well-meaning priest of Om, the Pictsies (blue people who are 6" tall and talk in an impenetrable Scots highland brogue), and a cast of lesser vampires, including Count



Magpyr's two teen-aged children, Vlad and Lacrimosa (who prefer to be called by names like Terrance and Sally to annoy their parents).

As in any good fairy tale there is a moral dimension; foremost in this book is Granny Weatherwax's fighting the temptation to give in and become a very powerful vampire out of sheer moral fiber and an inclination to make her own choices, thank you very much. Also, the priest of Om who starts

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out as a very modern sort of well-educated priest who doesn't believe in much of anything winds up realizing that a religion with good and evil (and good, singable songs) is what actually interests people. And, as before, there are Granny's lectures on not treating people like they were things.

The better Discworld novels are all fairy tales in the very best sense, and this is one of them.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Far Horizons
Edited by Robert Silverberg
Avon, 1999
481 pp., $27.50

Far Horizons is a companion to *Legends*, also edited by Silverberg. It's by far the more successful of the two books.

The gimmick (or "unifying theme" if you'd prefer) of both books is that they are a series of

novellas and novelettes written in classic SF (*Far Horizons*) and fantasy (*Legends*) universes. In both books I felt that the stories tended to be a bit light-weight. For the most part, they were too obviously tales out of the mainstream of the universe.

My favorites were:

Joe Haldeman, in "A Separate War," tells Marygay Potter's story during the last part of *The Forever War* where she and William Mandella were forced to go their separate ways for a few centuries. This may be the best story in the volume, and it certainly tells a lot more about the strange future Haldeman put together.

"Investment Counselor" by Orson Scott Card is a minor piece showing how Ender picked up his omnipotent AI sidekick, Jane.

Likewise, "Temptation" by David Brin follows the dolphins left behind on Jijo. What starts out here as a good story gets tied up — like the whole Jijo sub-series — in an absurd, over-complicated resolution.

Silverberg's "Roma Eterna" is a novelette set in a universe that I'd not read of previously, in which Christianity does not prevail and a pagan Roman Empire survives. Ordinarily, this particularly alternate history thread is so poorly done as to be horrifying, but Silverberg — if this story is any indication — knows what he's doing. At any rate, "Roma Eterna" is a nice, though inconsequential, story set against a very well-done background. I'll be looking up some of the other stories in this series.

"The Boy Who Would Live Forever" is another Heechee story by Fred Pohl — it starts out wonderfully, but seems in the end to peter out to nothing.

Finally, Greg Bear's "The Way of All Ghosts" tells a somewhat surreal story of Olmy's youth from his *Eon* series.

None of these stories were great, but they were certainly worth reading. Especially if you like the series within which they were written.

Rating: ☆☆☆

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban
By J. K. Rowling
Scholastic, 1999
435 pp., $19.95

The Harry Potter books are all much the same — they start with Harry suffering through the summer under his very, very mundane Aunt and Uncle, escaping to Hogwarts, and having an adventure during which he is picked on by the school bullies, does fun things with some friends, is suc-

cored by a friendly teacher, wins an important Quidditch game, and ultimately does something very important.

They're all the same and all a great deal of fun.

A lot of the fun comes from the wonderfully absurd background: his ultra-is-too-weak-a-word-mundane guardians and their ridiculous concerns. The silly, secret world of wizards and witches and Hogwarts itself — a magnificent creation!

The stories are fast-paced enough that the discordant details amuse without ever being really jarring. There are plenty of things that, if you stop to think about them for even a moment, don't even pretend to making sense, but fortunately, Rowling doesn't really encourage that. She just drags you along.

Highly recommended if you like unpretentious fun.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

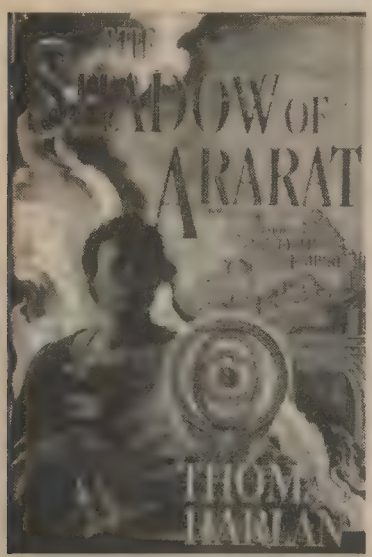
The Science of Discworld
By Terry Pratchett,
Ian Stewart, and Jack Cohen
Edbury Press, 1999
336 pp., £14.99

This is an interesting book but something of an oddity: It's a Discworld story, and it's a good job of popular science writing.

Pratchett has written a Discworld story set at Unseen University, where the wizards manage to build a model universe

in the High Energy Magic building which is about a foot across on the outside but seems very large indeed on the inside. They fiddle with it, mess with it, watch it change, misinterpret it, and generally compare it unfavorably to the Discworld. By the end it appears that it may well be our universe.

The interesting part is that between chunks of the story, the authors compare and contrast the wizards' approach to natural history (just a bit on the bizarre side) to our own, and compare the Discworld's actual science to that of our universe. This proves to be an excellent way to talk about



real-world science and how it's done.

The Science of Discworld is a fine popularization of science and of the scientific method, presented in a most unusual and entertaining manner. (And the wizards' discovery that the Discworld has a high concentration of the rare element narrativium — an element that makes it possible for a world's events to form coherent stories — is a breakthrough, indeed.)

Unfortunately, this book is presently available only in the UK — it doesn't yet seem to have a US edition scheduled.

Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

The Shadow of Ararat
By Thomas Harlan
Tor, 1999
510 pp., $26.95

If this book had been 10% shorter, it would be one of the best fantasies I've read. As it is, it's one of the best SF books I've read this year and will probably be on my Hugo list.

The Shadow of Ararat takes place around 600 AD in an alternate world where, a thousand years earlier, magic was harnessed. So the world is different: There is no Christianity, and while there is a Judaism with a Torah, it's a dualistic religion. (Though it's not different enough. Recognizable historical figures exist up until around 400 AD. It's as if Harlan had magic kick in at 400 BC, but history really didn't change much until 800 years later. Ridiculous, of course, but it does make for a much better story!)

Besides the intrusion of magic into the world, the second great change was that in this world, around 400 AD, the Western Roman Empire beat back the barbarians, and the Western and Eastern Empires are both alive and thriving. In fact, at the time of the story, the Western Empire is a lot healthier than the Eastern.

There are five threads to the story which interweave throughout and will doubtless be followed on into the sequel(s):

(1) The Western Emperor is setting out to join the Eastern Emperor in a great expedition to end the Persian menace once and for all. The Western Emperor, Galen, is a decent sort. The Eastern Emperor, Heraclius, is the usual twisted Byzantine.

(2) Thyastis is a top female agent of the Western Emperor. He sends her on some of the most dangerous missions possible, and she's always successful.

(3) Drwyinn MacDonald is a young Celt who is training in magic at a school in Egypt. He's a troublemaker, so when the Empire demands magicians to accompany the army into Persia, he's hastily commissioned as a Journeyman and sent into battle.

(4) Ahmet is Drwyinn's teacher and a powerful magician, who feels that Drwyinn was badly treated. He follows Drwyinn to try to help him, but gets sucked into a side theater of the war and falls in with one Mohammed, a merchant from Arabia, and the armies of the independent buffer state of Palmyra.

(5) Finally, Maxian, the younger brother of the Emperor Galen, who has been trained as a healer-magician-priest rather than in government, while poking around in some minor mysterious occurrences, discovers a terrible curse on all of Rome and builds up an enormous amount of magical power to try to stop it.

By the end of the book, the main plot's been resolved, but it's obvious that some of the "minor" characters are actually going to figure in even bigger things later. The plot is intricate, but it works. My

initial crack about it being 10% too long is because it drags a bit in places.

In spite of that, this is an excellent historical fantasy, being the other pole to Judith Tarr's excellent *Lord of the Two Lands*. In Tarr's book, the magical element is so light that you're never absolutely sure it's there. Here there's no doubt whatsoever. But both are well-told stories, well-grounded in their times.

Highly recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2

Quarantine
By Greg Egan
HarperPrism, 1992
280 pp., $4.50

Quarantine is yet another pyrotechnic SF novel by Greg Egan following his standard tech-

nique of taking some outré speculation and building a story around it. *Quarantine* starts out ordinarily enough and builds to crescendos of spectacular science and action, with a very healthy dose of paranoia and how-do-we-know-that-*anything*-is-true thrown in.

The central gimmick in *Quarantine* concerns the problems of quantum mechanics and the collapse of the wave function: QM is a theory perfect except for the kludgy requirement that the wavefunction collapse on observation. Egan's book revolves around that in a wonderful and beautifully plausible way. I won't go through the plot, but I will assure

you that he does a very good job of making it all hang together.

Just about everything Egan writes is good.

Recommended.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

A Calculus of Angels
By J. Gregory Keyes
Del Rey, 1999
406 pp., $14.00

This, the sequel to the excellent *Newton's Cannon,* is the second book in an n-ology that shows every sign of being truly wonderful.

After inventing calculus and a theory of gravity and optics, in our world Sir Isaac Newton went on to study theology and alchemy — not yet clearly unscientific topics. In Keyes's world, he makes a breakthrough that establishes alchemy as a science and starts a scientific and industrial revolution based on it.

Several decades later, Newton has rejuvenated himself and seems destined to lead England to even greater heights, until Louis XIV's scientists use alchemy to call down an asteroid on London, destroying England and half of Western Europe and bringing a nuclear autumn on the world.

We discover that Louis and several other world leaders are controlled by some sort of alchemical entities which have become aware of humanity and intend to destroy it.

Newton escaped the destruction of Britain with his apprentice, the 17-year-old Benjamin Franklin, to continue the struggle against the malevolent entities, and there the first book ends.

This second book follows the characters from the first: Newton and Franklin, a French woman scientist who was instrumental in calling down the asteroid, and an assortment of colonial luminaries including Blackbeard the pirate and Cotton Mather — who are seeking to discover what happened to the Old World.

In the meantime, Turkish armies are advancing from the south and Peter the Great is advancing from Russia, and only the weak remnants of the Holy Roman Empire — and Sir Isaac Newton — stand between them and the conquest of what is left of Europe.

It's a marvelous, complicated, well-thought-out, fun (though not especially *nice*) story.

Highly recommended. (*Do* read the first one, first, though.)

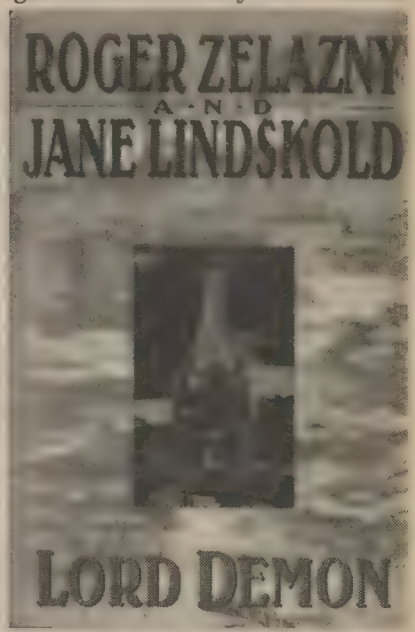
Rating: ☆☆☆☆

Stardust
By Neil Gaiman
Spike, 1999
235 pp., $22.00

Stardust is an interesting story told in the classic fairytale manner, but with a few modern twists — mostly, people show more independence than usual, and more of the politics and structure of Faery are visible than, say, the Brothers Grimm would have included.

The story is simple: There is a village in England that has a Wall with a gate (or is that a Gate?) to Faery. Every nine years a fair is held on the Faery side of the gate and people from all over Earth come for the chance to trade with Faery. But trading with Faery — dealing with Faery in any way — is dangerous. One man returns with a changeling child.

Years later another fair is at hand, and the changeling is now an 18-year-old young man who goes off into Faery on a foolish



quest — his not-quite-but-he-wishes-she-were-girlfriend asks him to bring her a fallen star. The quest ultimately succeeds in an unexpected way, but the un-girlfriend has long since married another.

Interestingly, the quest succeeds in part because of the youth's heroism, but more than his heroism, it succeeds because he is essentially a polite, decent person — a novelty that elicits help from many quarters.

Faery is rich and fabulous and dangerous — not least because of the nine brothers, Lords of Stormhold, who have to settle the succession by assassinating one another, with the ghosts of the assassinated brothers hanging around to comment on the technique of the survivors.

This is a fun modern fairy tale.
Rating: ☆☆☆ 1/2

Lord Demon
By Roger Zelazny
and Jane Lindskold
Avon Eos, 1999
276 pp., $23.00

Again we have a posthumous collaboration between Zelazny and Lindskold, and again we have a fun, thoroughly enjoyable book.

The first-person narrator of *Lord Demon* is a demon who is one of the greatest of demon warriors, but who has spent most of the last thousand years living in a bottle (*much* larger on the inside than on

the outside) creating fine pottery and eating pizza with his human, Irish drinking buddy.

The demons — self-designated, but with their powers it's not an inappropriate name — are the losers in a prehistoric battle with another magical race. They settled a reality neighboring ours, and for a long time their main entry point to Earth was in China. They *are* the demons of Chinese legend, but that's because Chinese legends record actual demon activities, not because the demons somehow followed Chinese cultural norms — in many respects, they created them.

Lord Demon follows the broad outline of many Zelazny stories: retired hero is living in zennish tranquility, but is rousted out of it by outside events and then takes the lead to restore a new order to the world. (Note that the superb Zelazny pastiche *Knight Moves,* by Walter Jon Williams, also follows this pattern.) It's a great plot, and Zelazny and Lindskold have added so many lovely embellishments that it's not the slightest bit stale.
Rating: ☆☆☆☆

A Civil Campaign
By Lois McMaster Bujold
Baen Books, 1999
405 pp., $24.00

This is one of Bujold's best.

I'm not sure, however, if I will nominate it for the Hugo, because I'm not sure that it's science fiction. The problem is that, for all its Sfnal trappings, it's a Regency romance or something very close to it. With one exception — Lord Dono — there is nothing in the plot that requires a setting on Barrayar rather than in Ruritania or 19th-century England. (The butter bugs, while providing a huge amount of comic relief, aren't essential to the plot and could be replaced by any other slightly crazy, somewhat silly, money-making scheme.)

So is *A Civil Campaign* SF? It's certainly on the fringes. What do I call it? A Space Regency? Regardless, it's a great book.

As in *Memory,* Bujold's done a very good job of continuing to grow her characters and has avoided the hyperkinetic war fiction that characterized some of the earlier stories in the series. (I do hope she doesn't lose the readers who started the series for that aspect — they'll be missing some good SF.)

This *is* a series book. You probably won't get nearly as much out of it if you haven't read at least of few of its immediate predecessors.

A Civil Campaign is one of the two or three most enjoyable books I've read this year. And the banquet scene was one of the funniest things I've read in years.
Rating: ☆☆☆☆ 1/2 ❑

Statement of Ownership and circulation

1A. Publication Title: Aboriginal Science Fiction. 1B. Publication No.: 0895-3198. 2. Filing Date: 12-31-1999. 4. Issue Frequency: Quarterly. 5. No. of issues published annually: four (4). 6. Annual subscription price: $16.00. 7. Complete mailing address of the known office of publication: Aboriginal Science Fiction P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849. 8. Complete mailing address of the headquarters of the general business offices of the publisher (not printer): The Second Renaissance Foundation, Inc., d.b.a. Aboriginal Science Fiction P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 9. Full names and complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor: PUBLISHER: The Second Renaissance Foundation, Inc., P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 Editor: Charles C. Ryan, P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849. Managing Editor: None. 10. Owner: Full Name: The Second Renaissance Foundation, Inc., P.O. Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849 (21 Woodbine Rd., Apt. 1., Natick, MA 01760) 11. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent of more of total amount of bonds, mortgages or other securities: None. 12. The purpose, function and status of the non-profit organization has not changed During the preceeding 12 months. 13 Publication Title: Aboriginal Science Fiction. 14. Issue Date for Circulation data: Fall 1999. 15. Extent and nature of circulation. Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months: A. Total no. of copies (net press run): 4,433 B. Paid and/or requested circulation. 1. Paid/requested outside County Mail Subscriptions stated on Form 3541: 157. 2. Paid in-county Subscriptions: 4 3. Sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street vendors, Counter sales, and other non-USPS paid distribution: 1,041. Other classes mailed through the USPS 2,767 C. Total paid circulation: 3,969 D. Free copies: 50 E. Free Distribution Outside of the Mail: 10 F. Total free distribution 60G. Total Distribution 4,029 H. Copies not distributed: 404; I. Total: 4,433. Percent paid and/or Requested 98.5%. Actual no. of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date (Fall 1999 issue): A. Total no. of copies: 4,100 B. Paid and/or requested circulation. 1. Paid/requested outside County Mail Subscriptions stated on Form 3541: 207. 2. Paid in-county Subscriptions: 4 3. Sales through Dealers and Carriers, Street vendors, Counter sales, and other non-USPS paid distribution: 748. Other classes mailed through the USPS 2,989 C. Total paid circulation: 3,948 D. Free copies: 50 E. Free Distribution Outside of the Mail: 10 F. Total free distribution 60G. Total Distribution 4,008 H. Copies not distributed: 92; I. Total: 4,100. Percent paid and/or Requested 98.5%. I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

Signature of editor:

Charles C. Ryan _____

The Question of Genre

A tremendous amount of critical rhetoric has been expended over the years on the question of *genre,* usually having to do with its limitations, "breaking down ghetto walls," "transcending genre" (always a term of praise) and that sort of thing. I've thought about it a lot myself. I've probably switched my own position several times. My current position is that it's useless to talk about "escaping genre limitations" because *there is no such thing as non-genre fiction,* nor has there ever been. By "genre," I mean fiction which attracts readers by virtue of category. Pre-existing elements, not unique to an individual book, sell the books in which those elements occur. That is, the reader who wants a western goes looking for westerns, the reader of detective stories looks for detective stories, the reader of socially upscale Generation X coming-of-angst novels goes looking for precisely that ... and so on. When Og the Caveman began his fire narratives around the primordial campfire, he was doubtless creating the genre of hunting stories, which has continued all the way up to William Faulkner. Homer wrote genre. The *Odyssey* is a "Return," i.e. a story of the homeward journal of one of the heroes of the Trojan War. There were many such works in his day, but only his, presumably the best, has survived. Shakespeare wrote in several genres: the revenge tragedy, the history play, the romantic comedy, etc.

The mainstream publishing world and mainstream readers tend to be the most ignorant and defensive about genre writing, often regarding it as beneath contempt. The clearest example of this comes out of an interview with Somtow Sucharitkul (a.k.a. S.P. Somtow) that I did for *Weird Tales.* Somtow, who has worked in several genres himself (horror, SF, young adult fantasy, etc.), wrote an extremely interesting autobiographical novel, *Jasmine Nights,* about his cosmopolitan boyhood, featuring a character born in Thailand but raised in several countries, with no clear cultural identity, who likes cowboys, dinosaurs, Greek and Roman mythology, etc.

After many rejections, Somtow sold the book to an English publisher. The editor had never heard of him. Said she, "I was able to read your novel with an unprejudiced eye, because, of course, I don't read genre." Unfortunately, this proved to be a two-edged sword, because once the editors at that English publishing house found out that Somtow was a genre writer, they rejected his next "mainstream novel." As Somtow put it, "They're seeing these tiny clues in it, which were also present in *Jasmine Nights,* only they didn't know I was a genre writer." Once they discovered he was "unclean," I am sure they regretted having published *Jasmine Nights* and were probably resentful that he had pulled one over on them.

My own feeling (never having had any contact with the publishing house involved) is that Somtow is describing an ignorant, prejudiced editor who should be fired, who was unwilling to follow up one successful book with another in the mistaken belief that "genre" writing is somehow inherently inferior or limiting, *and that there is a possibility of something else.*

So, my response to that sort of prejudice, whether it comes from editors, academics, or *The New York Times Book Review* is, to use a technical term, Screw 'Em. My advice to the writers is not to even bother with minds that are closed. Conquer the reading public instead. If you can make your books read by millions of people all over the planet, if you can become a genuine cultural force, the way that, say, Isaac Asimov or William Gibson did, then if some provincial *New York Times* critic or some hidebound academic hasn't heard of you (because they don't read "genre"), well, who cares? If your work is vital and can speak meaningfully to generations yet unborn, it doesn't *need* such approval. If it can't, such approval won't help. The academics will fall in line, as they always do, a couple of generations later, when the old professors die off and are replaced by their students, who were your readers. Which is how, precisely, writers such as H.P. Lovecraft and Philip K. Dick have become "literature."

But, I repeat: all books are

Rating System

☆☆☆☆☆	Outstanding
☆☆☆☆	Very Good
☆☆☆	Good
☆☆	Fair
☆	Poor

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genre. Don't think of the publishing scene as a walled-off ghetto surrounded by a broad and free city of spacious avenues. Think of it instead as a series of cells in a honeycomb. Each is a genre. That's all there is. It is sometimes possible to jump out of one cell into the next, as Kurt Vonnegut or Dean Koontz did. It is possible to operate in more than one cell at the same time, as, say, Kate Wilhelm does. It is also possible to build your own cell, to become a "brand name," so that a book doesn't sell because it is a science fiction novel but because it is an Arthur C. Clarke novel. Lots of writers have done this, including the above-mentioned Vonnegut and Koontz, not to mention, most spectacularly, Stephen King, but also everybody from Mark Twain to Ernest Hemingway to Joyce Carol Oates. For the writer, being a "brand name" is a very desirable thing, because it means you have a market for almost anything you care to write — unless you're the late Frank Herbert and your own private brand-name/genre is called "Dune."

Genre, beyond its inevitability, is a marketing tool, equally inescapable. Go into a bookstore and look around. Everything is divided up into sections, because readers don't want to have to sort through a jumble. You don't put a Harry Potter book, a Penguin Classics edition of Cicero, a Danielle Steele, the *Collected Fictions* of Borges, and H. Rider Haggard on the same shelf. Books don't sell that way. Even at your local charity-benefit used book sale, run by a bunch of old ladies in a church basement, there will be some attempt to group the books by type. It is an inescapable fact that they sell better that way.

Genres, of course, wax and wane. Some vanish altogether. Nobody publishes Lost Race novels anymore, or Gothics, in the sense of those spooky women's romances of the '60s, all of which had the same cover showing a lady in a nightgown holding a candle as she fled from a dark tower or manse in which there was one lighted window.... Remember those? There are genres that barely have names. Imitations of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* were called, informally, "road books." They stopped coming out about 1965. Collectors of vintage paperbacks will know what I mean by the Hillbilly Lust Novel (the term is my invention), the covers of which usually showed a busty, barefoot lass just about falling out of her dress as she is ogled by a hayseed in the haystack, beneath such a title as (an actual book; I am *not* making this up) *Lament for Four Virgins.* There are early paperback editions of William Faulkner which look very much like Hillbilly Lust Novels. ("Never mind his Nobel Prize," I can imagine the art director saying. "We gotta sell books!" Gore Vidal, who once had the same editor as Faulkner, describes it pretty much that way in his memoir *Palimpsest.*)

Among the newer genres, there's Fantasy, which is a very old form of literature, but used to hide out in Literature or Science Fiction or Young Adult (or even Historical) until solidifying in the post-Tolkien years. (That the major Fantasy line then proceeded to make a complete mockery of everything Tolkien ever stood for and aim at a lowest common denominator audience is another story, and one I have bemoaned in this column before.) The Vampire Novel ("The *Star Trek* of Horror," David Schow warned us years ago) is well on its way to becoming a distinct genre, particularly the romantic, sympathetic (but angst-ridden) vampire series novel. Horror itself had an uneasy relationship with Thrillers and Mainstream until breaking out on its own in the late '60s. It then shrank back almost to the vanishing point in the mid-'90s, and now seems to be on the upswing again.

And of course, as many Literary readers won't admit or are perhaps even unaware, "Mainstream" or "Literary" fiction includes dozens of distinct and fluctuating genres, such as the Coming of Age novel, the War Novel, the Social Comedy, the Adultery Novel, the Immigrant or Culture Shock Novel, the Ethnic Novel (many subsets), the Rock & Roll novel, the High Finance novel and so on, each of which has its own strengths and weaknesses, conventions and taboos.

One of the ways you can tell a really viable book is by its ability to jump between genres. The record is probably held by Fritz Leiber's *Conjure Wife,* which has been published variously as science fiction (in its original book appearance in the anthology *Witches Three* — actually a fantasy collection in the Twayne Triplets series, but publishers didn't know what to do with fantasy in the early '50s), a horror novel, a gothic (complete with lady in nightgown and light in window), and, lately, in a handsome trade paperback from Tor (1999, 348 pp., $17.95), *Dark Ladies*, which also contains *Our Lady of Darkness,* now categorized as Dark Fantasy.

I had the chance recently to ask one of the Tor editors what the purpose of this new category is. "Isn't that like calling a garbage collector a sanitary engineer?" I asked. "Why not just call it a horror book?"

"We want to get it out of the horror section and into the fantasy section," the editor said. Presumably it must be called Dark Fantasy in order to distinguish it from just Fantasy, which means Terry Brooks and *Elfquest.*

Does all of this matter? In the short term, in the author's lifetime (or in Leiber's case, a

little bit beyond), yes, it does, very much. It determines how many books are sold and to whom. In the very long term, I like to think, only the vitality of the text itself matters. Three hundred years from now, Fritz Leiber may have moved into Twentieth Century Classics and be read by people who tell you that, of course, they never read genre.

What genre a book falls into, then, is a matter of publishing strategy. It is a decision made by editors and the sales force. It is not arbitrary, at least not if the editors and sales force are at all competent. Sometimes the author has some input into this decision, sometimes not. Sometimes he tailors the work to fit into a preexisting category, and sometimes the editors and sales force have to figure out which of several honeycomb cells the book best fits into. If there isn't a suitable cell available, sometimes it is necessary to create a new one.

This is just the nature of literature. There's not much anyone can do about it.

Darwin's Radio
By Greg Bear
Del Rey, 1999
427 pp., $24.00

This one is a science fiction novel trying to cross over into the Thriller category. One notes how the package carefully avoids saying "science fiction," but for a slip on the back flap ("A main selection of the Science Fiction Book Club"). There's an obvious attempt to pitch to the Michael Crichton/Robin Cook sort of audience for technical/medical/disaster novels, with the built-in assumption that Greg Bear's science fiction readership will buy it anyway.

That may be a sound strategy. I wish the book well. It is a good novel by any standard, but frankly I do *not* think it has much "breakout" potential. The premise is too abstruse: "fossil" remnants dormant in our DNA suddenly activate, causing first a plague of miscarriages, then a leap forward in human evolution. And there is way too much science in it for the lazy reader, who is used to a few easy-to-swallow clichés and assumes that anything else is technobabble.

It's not. Science fiction readers will respect Bear's efforts to get it all right, to keep his speculations firmly at the frontiers of evolutionary biology. Science fiction readers know to pay attention to the infodumps, to refer back to them as needed. Bear even goes to the extraordinary length of supplying an appendix providing a short, college-level course in basic biology, with an extensive glossary of terms. Ask yourself, how many people *really* know the precise meanings of "DNA," "gene," and "chromosome"? Better yet, ask your mundane relatives. And when you get to terms like "Lysogenic phage" and "human endogenous retrovirus," well, forget it.

As a writer, Bear faced the difficult choice of developing his ideas to the fullest and risking losing part of his audience or dumbing down his book. I think he's made the best compromise possible, but still, even for science fiction readers, this is a difficult book. For casual mainstream readers (or even scientifically illiterate Literary readers) it is surely *impossible.*

That being said, I recommend the novel. The story itself is about a small cast of characters investigating the emerging disaster/phenomenon. It starts with the discovery of frozen Neandertal corpses high in the Alps and the investigation of possible war crimes in former Soviet Georgia. The time is just about the present. (Shevardnadze is still president.) The structure of the book is that of the best-seller/disaster novel, with lots of short, interweaving chapters from differing points of view, building the pattern of the big event, which becomes gradually more apocalyptic, though without most of the best-seller/thriller/disaster novel clichés. No car chases here. No silly melodrama. Toward the end, the book is pointing in a distinctly science-fictional direction, toward *Odd John* and *Childhood's End.*

Rating: ☆☆☆

The Marriage of Sticks
By Jonathan Carroll
Tor, 1999
270 pp., $23.95

Speaking of writers who have jumped categories several times, Jonathan Carroll's first fantasy novel, *The Land of Laughs,* was published as mainstream/literary in 1980 and promptly died, for all it is one of the great fantastic novels of the past 25 years. Word of mouth within the fantasy community caused it to be reprinted as Fantasy from Ace. That didn't work either. Carroll then moved over into Literary Fiction for a while. Now, Tor's copywriter informs us, he is back in Fantasy, with his most overtly fantastic novel in many years, which is actually nonsense, because it is no more or less fantastic than *Outside the Dog Museum* (1991) or *From the Teeth of Angels* (1994) or the stories in *The Panic Hand* (1996), all of which were published as mainstream. Whatever, I hope this latest attempt to position Carroll works, because he is a wonderful writer who deserves to be read.

More precisely, he writes *beautifully.* It's not merely a matter of style but a knack for the sharp image or little scene that defines an emotion perfectly. "Yes," you will say, "I have felt like that," even if you haven't. On the most intimate level, his work rings true, even when he is writing about lives quite outside the experience of most of us. It would be glib to

say that Carroll writes New Age Fantasy novels about Woody Allen characters, but there's just a little bit of truth in that. His characters are almost always witty, successful, upper-class people who lead interesting and fulfilling lives (usually in the creative arts or somewhere close to them; the narrator of *The Marriage of Sticks* is a dealer in fine used books), the sort of people who would *never,* ever have anything to do with a typical Stephen King character, much less a Joe Lansdale character. But I can only say that such people really do exist and Carroll makes them real. On that level, he's as good a writer as can be found anywhere.

His fantastic elements don't always jell. His characters tend to assume that supernatural events just happen. There is no particular questioning of this — which, in marketing terms, would make Carroll a Magic Realist if only he had a Spanish surname. His strength is that he has a genuinely eerie touch, as good as anything in M.R. James or Robert Aickman. His weakness is that sometimes the fantastic elements seem too rushed, too poorly thought out. *The Marriage of Sticks* starts out as a really wonderful, sensitive novel about life-choices and lost possibilities, one big "if only," starting with the heroine's return to her home town for a high school class reunion, where she learns that her bright and smart best friend has had a pretty wretched life, and her own old boyfriend didn't do all that well either and is now dead. Some while into the book, the boyfriend's ghost appears. Some while further, she meets an amazing hundred-year-old woman who knew everybody and did everything and helps her understand that she is a reincarnated "vampire" who selfishly drains the happiness out of other people's lives. But the narrator doesn't *seem* to be that nasty a person, no more self-centered than most of us. Apparitions come thick and fast. The narrator makes a choice, which cancels out a lot of possibilities, including her own never-to-be-born daughter (is that a good thing?), and seems to pass her "vampire" nature on to someone else. (Does that accomplish anything?) In the end I am not really sure why much of this happens, and am not really convinced, emotionally, that it should have. But the writing is wonderful and there are a lot of great bits. I am even willing to admit that a second, slow reading of the book might do it justice, something we book reviewers seldom get the chance to do.

Rating: ☆☆☆

999
Edited by Al Sarrantonio
Avon, 1999
666 pp., $27.50

It may be the Millennium, or the fact that all those R.L. Stine readers are now college age and ready for adult fiction, but Horror, which has been on the critical list for some years now, is making a decided comeback. This new, fat anthology is a deliberate, avowed attempt to repeat the history of the field, becoming a latter-day equivalent of Kirby McCauley's blockbuster *Dark Forces* (1980), which ushered in the *previous* horror boom. It seems like only yesterday to me, but *Dark Forces* was long enough ago that it inspired the now bestselling Poppy Z. Brite to try her hand at this stuff. The rest is, as they say, history. Whole careers may well arise in the backwash of *999,* and for the same reason. It is an impressive collection, illustrating the possibilities of the form at a time of renewed interest.

Suffice it to say this is going to be *the* horror anthology of 1999, and will probably sweep all the awards. But there is some crisis of definition evident here, the very same which plagued and dissipated the horror audience during the previous cycle. What *is* a horror story anyway? Is it just anything that makes you shudder? Does it have to be supernatural, or "weird" in the Lovecraftian sense? How is it distinguished from the crime story? Certainly there are non-fantastic stories in this book. Joe Lansdale's "Mad Dog Summer" might be described as more Faulkneresque than Lovecraftian, about children facing evil in rural Texas, back in the early 1930s. It is a fine story by any standard, with spooky undertones, but ultimately about nothing beyond ordinary experience. Edward Lee's "ICU," once it gets past one of the funniest literary malapropisms I have seen in a while (p. 248: "Paone squinted through grit teeth," which means, I suppose, that his eyes are in the back of his mouth), goes straight for the grossout with an admittedly vivid tale of crime and torture. Much better is Chet Williamson's "Excerpts from the Records of the New Zodiac and the Diaries of Henry Watson Fairfax," which is also pretty gross, but *very,* darkly funny.

Fortunately Sarrantonio finds plenty of place for the fantastic and the subtle. The best story in the book is "The Ruins of Contracoeur" by Joyce Carol Oates, about the children of a discredited politician, exiled to a decaying country estate, finding that the reality around them is also decaying in odd ways. There's a Thomas Ligotti story, full of surreal, cosmic horrors, also a surreal (?) story by Tim Powers which, to me at least, makes no sense. Subtle, but far more effective, is Thomas Disch's "The Owl and the Pussycat," told from the point of view of an autistic child, which may or may not have fantastic content, depending how you look at it. Stephen King provides an old-fashioned, EC Comics sort of fright.

F. Paul Wilson provides visceral, supernatural horror, as vampires take over America, having, apparently, already overwhelmed much of the rest of the world. Gene Wolfe's narrator, on a South Pacific isle, seems to have become blood-brother to a shark god. Neil Gaiman writes a story of crime and lust and also what might be described as a lost race — but his actual monsters are fully human. Kim Newman presents a weirdly satircal account of the zombification of Russia ("Amerikanski Dead at the Moscow Morgue"), which is presumably a survivor from the never published third volume in the Skipp and Spector *Books of the Dead* series, sharing a common background with the George Romero *Living Dead* films. (One can only say this was the best "media tie-in" series in history, producing many genuinely distinguished stories.)

Overall, a very strong collection. Hardly a stinker in it.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

NOTED:

Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!
By Arthur C. Clarke
St. Martin's Press, 1999
558 pp., $35.00

This is subtitled, "Collected Essays, 1934-1998," which may make the Clarke collector wonder how many previous volumes it will replace. Answer: none. There are not enough duplications to eliminate anything from your shelf, and there's enough original material to justify acquiring this collection even if you have all the previous ones. Sir Arthur Clarke is, of course, one of the world's leading writers, who was knighted recently for his services to Literature (something very few of those Professorly Adultery novelists can ever hope for). As an essayist he is witty and rational, something we certainly need in this darkening New Age. He writes abouts science, space travel, undersea exploration, his fondness for (and meeting with) Lord Dunsany, etc. There are tributes to eminent contemporaries, scientists, science fiction writers, even the pioneering SF artist Frank R. Paul. Certainly Clarke has never forgotten his fannish roots. A lot of the essays are short. They don't quite have the depth or intensity of, say, Carl Sagan, but still this is an interesting book to browse through and read a little bit at a time. It will keep your brain awake for quite a long while.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆

The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories
By H.P. Lovecraft
Edited by S.T. Joshi
Penguin Twentieth Century Classics, 1999
420 pp., $12.95

It's finally happened. Lovecraft is officially Literature, having made Penguin Classics, as, certainly, none of his contemporary contributors to the fantasy & SF pulps has done or is likely to ever do. Lovecraft is pretty firmly established now as the new Poe. Next: Modern Library. In a generation: Library of America.

The present volume will probably reach a lot of people who have never read Lovecraft before. As such, its selection is not entirely ideal, containing as it does not only some of the best Lovecraft tales ("The Call of Cthulhu," "The Colour Out of Space," "The Whisperer in Darkness," "The Shadow Over Innsmouth") but also some of the worst ("The Hound," "Herbert West: Reanimator"). One understands, however, that this is effectively a companion to the two other volumes of Annotated Lovecraft Joshi has done for another publisher. This volume, too, has full notes and critical apparatus. To the uninitiated Mr. Joshi may seem a bit egotistical as he constantly refers to reader to his own editions of Lovecraft, his own critical work, his biography, etc., but this is fully justified when one realizes that Joshi *is* the world's leading authority, who *has* done most of the pioneering scholarship, editing the definitive editions, producing the definitive texts, writing the definitive biography. Rarely in the history of literature has the scholarship of a major writer been so throughly dominated by one person. And this is just one more item on "the indefatigable" Mr. Joshi's long list of accomplishments.

Rating: ☆☆☆☆☆

Colossus
By Donald Wandrei
Fedogan & Bremer, 1999
462 pp., $29.00

This is an expanded second edition (adding two stories, plus photos) of the collected science fiction of a member of the Lovecraft circle who, as Fritz Leiber is quoted as saying on the jacket, seemed upon the death of the Master to be his most likely successor. Wandrei had a truly cosmic imagination and genuine poetic gifts. But he dropped the ball somewhere in the 1940s. These are intriguing youthful works (mostly from *Astounding Stories* in the 1930s) full of wild imagination and pulp slapdash, pointing to a promise that was never fulfilled, a mix of wonderful, otherworldly descriptions and "Don't touch that lever or you'll blow us up!" sort of plotting. Wandrei's later life seems to have been one of embitterment and sad decline. He spent his last years suing Arkham House, which he had helped found to preserve the works of his friend Lovecraft. Now one can only hope that his association with Lovecraft will keep his name alive, in a small way.

The new edition is extremely well-made, and nicely illustrated by Rodger Gerberding. The introduction is by Richard Tierney.

Order from: Fedogan & Bremer, 3721 Minnehaha Ave. South, Minneapolis, MN 55406.

Rating: ☆☆☆ ❑

Millennial Fever?

As I am writing this, I am on one side of Y2K, and as you read this you are on the other. So by now you know whether New Year's Day was as anticlimactic as it was shaping up to be, or if the world is wallowing in masochistic glee about finally being able to create a truly global fiasco.

Clyde Duensing, III

What is it about numbers? Why should a two with three zeros attached make us think of dire endings, grand new beginnings, milestones? I think it's for the same reason we have traditions surrounding christenings, marriages, birthdays, and deaths. It seems to us like a good place to stop, take note, reflect, plan, celebrate, and reinvent ourselves in some small way. And that must be something we human beings need.

In our last issue we met a crusty fisherman named Tom in "Locals," by **Dennis Fisher**. In the second of three stories set in the same alien locale, we learn more about Tom in Fisher's "Feeders." It's evident that Fisher, a Colby College graduate who moved to Maine a few years ago, knows something about self-reliant stubborn Yankees. He also knows quite a bit about making homemade brew, one of his hobbies.

Dennis Fisher

"Feeders" is illustrated by **Clyde Duensing, III**, who has gotten bitten by the computer art bug and is now into 3-D animation and going to computer conferences where the worlds of computer technology, movie special effects, and art intersect. Duensing hasn't been bitten by many real bugs, however, since he tells me Florida's mosquitoes were unusually scarce this past year.

In "Forked Tongue," by **Mark Huntley Parsons**, a clever underling and an obnoxious boss clash over an alien visitor, with a nicely satisfying ending, folks. Parsons lists his occupations as "nuclear security/music journalist/rock drummer." As a music journalist he has published a lot of non-fiction in magazines such as *Modern Drummer* and *Recording*. As a drummer, he and his wife **Wendelin** perform with the band "Burning Bridges." As a science fiction writer, he is working on a technothriller and several short stories, and marks "Forked Tongue" as his first professional sale.

"Forked Tongue" is illustrated by **Larry Blamire**, of "Wise-Eye Guys" fame. And if you don't know what I'm talking about, get your keyboard tappin' fingers over to the website Balihighway.com. While you are there, check out his warped and amusing greeting cards in "Dr. Pullover's Carnival of Miracles." (I recently sent his Thanksgiving card to a young friend of mine.)

The paths people take after the social consciousness of their youth are the theme of **Gary M. Gibson**'s "The Prometheus Code." Gibson is a Scotsman who at the time he filled out our questionnaire was "happily unemployed (but working on a secret project.)" He has had works published in horror magazines and **Interzone**. When asked if he is married, he answers, "Christ, no," but lists his favorite hobbies as

Larry Blamire

"Small-press publishing, women, reading, playing loud guitar, women, drinking, women (also women)." Women, take note.

"The Prometheus Code" is illustrated by **David Deitrick**. I spoke to his artist wife **Lori Dietrick** while David was out and discovered he had been in the hospital three times in the past month, twice at the emergency room, for what should have been simple minor surgery. He was, thankfully, on the mend at last. Lori said he had just finished up a

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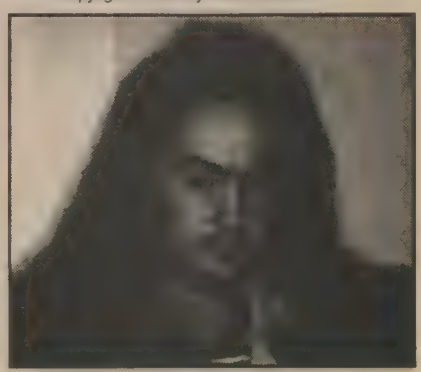

Gary M. Gibson

Stephen Woodworth

poster connected to the old Traveler games, was working on cards for "Legends of the Five Rings," and was still teaching art history and sculpture at Roane Community College in East Tennessee. Lori had just finished a commissioned fantasy portrait of a four-year-old girl as a Renaissance fairy that both she and the little girl were very happy with.

"Jack's Hand" by **Stephen Woodworth** is a creepy thriller of a story about a man who loses his hand in a mysterious accident. Woodworth, aka Steve, "The Liquidator," claims to make his living selling shrunken heads on the black market. His story "Scary Monsters" won first place in the Writers of the Future Contest and appears in *Writers of the Future, Volume VIII*. Woodworth enjoys role-playing and acting in community theater and, *get this*, he was an extra and stand-in on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. He says, "I shook hands with Patrick Stewart! What more can one ask of life!" Indeed!

"Jack's Hand" is illustrated by **Beryl Bush** in her *Aboriginal* debut. Bush has produced cover art-

Beryl Bush

work for *Dreams of Decadence* and interior artwork for *Analog*, *Asimovs'* and *Artemis*. The New York City resident is the 1999 winner of the Chesley Award in the category of Best Monochrome Work, Unpublished. And she has received a number of awards at convention art shows, including Director's Choice and Best of Show.

The multiple personalities that inhabit one body in **Stefano Donati**'s "Close Quarters" have got to learn to get along. Donati says the sale of his work to *Aboriginal* "was my second ever, and my first outside the small-press market. I still remember the thrill! I can never say enough how much (Charlie Ryan's) acceptance (both of "Close Quarters" and of a later story) gave me hope that I have some writing talent." Donati has since sold stories to *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Writers of the Future*, and *Talebones*, among others.

"Close Quarters" is illustrated by **Jael**, who was a busy lady when I caught up to her in December. She had two private commissions to finish before Christmas, was working on three covers of children's classics, had overflow numbers in her art classes, and on top of all that she was taking care of her adorable six-year-old grandson for the month of December and had promised to help her husband Greg display his custom Harley-Davidson at an upcoming bike show. Whew!

The memory of an alien is the highlight of a brilliant man's life in "Mr. Harriman's Peculiar Vigil," by **Joseph Flanagan**. Flanagan is associate editor of *Common Ground* magazine in Washington, D.C. His work has appeared in *Washington City Paper* and *The Current*. He lives in Alexandria, Virginia.

"Mr. Harriman's Peculiar Vigil" is illustrated by **Cortney Skinner**, who was recovering from the flu when I spoke to him. He was devoting the majority of his time to his Secret Museum project at Balihighway.com (see my last column) and was enjoying his collaborative efforts with more technical types at Balihighway.com as it grows and expands into other areas of entertainment. He also had news about longtime girlfriend **Julia Smith**. She was one of the Early American craftspeople who was

Jael

asked to create an ornament for the White House Christmas tree this year. When I spoke to Cortney they had just received an invitation to the White House. He also says Julia's website, juliasmith.com, is a gorgeous one, worth checking out if you like 17th- and 18th-century pottery.

Our cover art is the third in a row from British artist **Chris Moore**, whose work comprises a chapter in the new Dick Jude book *Fantasy Art of the New Millennium*, published by HarperCollins. When I contacted him he was heading into Christmas with covers to complete for *Dr. Bloodmoney*, *The Centauri Device*, *The Other Eden* by Ben El-ton, plus *Heroic Quest*, the second in the Arrandin fantasy trilogy by Marcus Herniman. He is also working on the covers for the new book by Stephen Coonts, the book *Fountains of Paradise*, and a book that contains three Philip K. Dick stories. He recently finished a very different sort of project, a 13-image calendar for the New England pizza chain Papa Gino's, in conjunction with "computer maestro" Pete Robinson. ❑

Cortney Skinner

Multi-Bounce

Here is a little thought experiment for you. Imagine that you are standing on home plate, staring at a major league pitcher who has just hurled a 90-mile-per hour fast ball straight at your head. What would you do? Well, any normal person would let out a scream and hit the dirt. But for this little thought experiment, let's assume that you are not a normal person, but a scientist, one who recognizes this as the perfect opportunity for a quick experiment. Instead of dropping to the ground, our scientist just stands there and lets the baseball crack him/her square in the forehead.

What happens?

In all likelihood our scientist's skull is fractured, but that is of no importance for this experiment. What matters is what happens to the scientist and the baseball. The first thing an observer of this experiment would notice is that the baseball would bounce off the scientist's shattered forehead, rebounding back toward the pitcher's mound. The second thing that the observer would note is that the scientist would be knocked off his/her feet, thrown back behind home plate.

Physics is a beautiful thing.

As described so eloquently by Sir Isaac Newton's First Law of Motion — the momentum of a system remains constant, where the momentum, p, of an object is defined as the product of its mass, m, and velocity, v.

$$p = mv$$

In the case of our scientist/baseball system before the moment of impact, the baseball possessed all the motion, and therefore all the momentum. Our scientist was standing still and therefore had no momentum. Let us assume for our thought experiment that the ball bounces off the scientist's head, recoiling backward with the *same* speed at which it struck him.

Be careful here.

Speed and velocity are not the same thing. Speed tells you how fast something is moving, while velocity not only tells you how fast it is moving, but *also* in what direction it is moving. If the baseball bounces backward at the same speed at which it was coming toward the scientist, then the baseball has been changed in velocity by 2v. Do you see why? The 90 mph fast ball which had been coming *at* the scientist is now going *away* from him at 90 mph. The ball has changed its velocity by 180 mph.

Now we get back to Sir Isaac. He said that in any system, that momentum must be conserved. We've already seen that there has been a big momentum change in the bouncing baseball, so we need another object whose momentum is the exact opposite of the baseball's so that the net change in momentum of the system (baseball plus scientist) is zero.

What object is that?

It is of course the scientist with the cracked forehead who recoils from the baseball's impact.

Wonderful.

With this understanding, you are now in a position to build the engine of a spaceship and take a trip to Mars. It's as easy as that. Have your spaceship parked in Earth orbit and start firing baseballs at it. As the balls bounce off the back of the ship, Newton's first law forces the ship to move away in the opposite direction.

Baseball propulsion.

Certainly feasible, but probably just a bit economically impractical when you consider how much a major league pitcher gets paid these days. What we need is something else to fire at our spacecraft.

How about light?

That might not sound all that bright on first consideration (excuse my pun). Everyday experience tells you that light does not have all that much momentum. If it did, every time you walked into a dark room and flipped on the light switch, the onslaught of light streaming from the lamp would smack into you, knock you off your feet, and smash you into the wall.

This generally doesn't happen.

The problem is that in this case you are only dealing with a 100-watt light bulb. If you want to see people flying through the air when you flip on a light switch, you'll need considerably more power.

How much power? It so happens that I've got a handy equation to describe how a spaceship gets accelerated when bombarded by a beam of light:

$$a = 2RP/Mc$$

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where a is the acceleration of the spacecraft, R is the reflectivity of the spacecraft (if the light is totally reflected, then R = 1.00), P is the power of the light beam, M is the mass of the spacecraft, and c is the speed of light. Once we know the acceleration of the craft, it is very easy to figure out both its velocity and the distance it has moved as a function of time:

$v = at$
$d = 0.5at^2$

where t is the time that the light is shining on the spacecraft and d is the total distance that the craft has traveled.

The concept of using photons (particles of light) as a form of space transportation goes back as far as 1924. And science fiction writers who also happen to be scientists such as Robert Forward and Geoffrey Landis have spent a fair amount of time with their scientist hats on working out the details of lightsail spacecraft.

So just what is possible with this technique? Can we get rid of those bulky chemical rocket engines and simply shine our flashlights on the back-end of our spacecraft to speed off to the planets?

Let's take a look.

Rather than using a flashlight, we'll stick to using lasers. The reason for this is that a laser beam does not spread out much as it travels (diffract). If you are thinking about setting up a big laser on Earth to push spacecraft about the solar system, you have to be worried about the spread of the laser beam — if the beam diameter starts getting larger than the craft, then that too-large portion of the beam is being wasted, simply flying off into space and not intercepting the spaceship.

So rather than a flashlight, let's use a device that most of you have probably seen at one time or another — a laser pointer. These devices typically have output power of 1 milliwatt (0.001 watt, which we will call 1.0×10^{-3} W).

For our example, let's say that you are an astronaut in Earth orbit and you receive an emergency transmission from the fledgling Mars colony that they have a desperate need of the latest batch of Mars Flu vaccine. It so happens that you have a handy lightsail craft at your disposal, one that weighs 500 kg and can haul 500 kg of flu vaccine. The craft itself is 99.9% sail, perhaps a square mile of nearly perfectly reflecting material which is only a few atoms thick. At the center of the sail sits a small pod that holds the cargo.

You quickly load up the craft, and turn on your space station's laser propulsion system. But nothing happens. Your laser is down. What to do? Well, you realize that you have that handy dandy laser pointer in your pocket. You take it out and shine it at the 1000 kg spacecraft while sending a message to Mars that the vaccine is on the way.

And how long will it take the craft to travel the 100 million km distance to Mars? We can plug our numbers into the above equations using our 1x10-3 power level, and you find that the vaccine will reach Mars in a mere 5×10^{12} seconds. Is that a lot of seconds? If you translate seconds into years, you find that the craft will reach Mars in 165,000 years.

That is not good.

I would say that by then the flu would have already run its course. And then there is the issue of our poor astronaut standing there for all those years shining the laser pointer, having to change out the AA batteries every few hours.

And to make matters even worse, I neglected the diffraction effects. You find that you reach a diffraction limit, S_d, which is the distance at which your laser beam starts to diverge to the point that its width actually becomes larger than the sail, and you start throwing away photons. This limit can be expressed as:

$S_d = Dd/2l$

where D is the diameter of the lightsail, d is the diameter of the laser, and l is the wavelength of your laser light. For this case, we will let D be 1000 m, d would typically be about .001 m, and l is 7.5×10^{-7} m for red light. Plug those numbers in and you find that you reach the diffraction limit when your sail has moved away 560 km. Once it moves past that point, the width of the laser beam starts to get larger than the 1000 m sail, and you begin to throw photons away. Because of this effect, lightsail engineers usually turn the laser off at this point and then just let the sail cruise under constant velocity the rest of the way to its target. What we find is that it will take around 1.2×10^{10} seconds for the craft to reach the diffraction limit, at which point it has reached the astounding velocity of about 1×10^{-4} m/s. We turn the laser off and let it cruise at this speed for 100 million kilometers until it reaches Mars.

And how long will that take?

Over 30 million years.

Apparently the laser pen is not going to get the job done.

In fact, the type of lasers which sail engineers typically envision for these sort of craft

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www.aboriginalsf.com

have powers not in the 10^{-3} watt range of our laser pointer, but in the multi-terawatt range — that is 10^{12} watt. Now, that is a lot of power.

Just how much power?

The total output power of everything on planet earth is 10 terawatts.

This is obviously a problem — I doubt that the citizens of this planet would be willing to divert every last watt of power production to sending some craft flitting about the solar system.

Perhaps that 1000 kg craft is just too big for this technique. Maybe we should just send small packages. Back in 1984 researchers looked into this possibility and found that they could send 10 kg of craft and cargo to Mars in a mere 10 days using a 47 GW laser. That's much better, since a GW is 1000 times *smaller* than a TW. But let me calibrate you. A typical full scale nuclear power plant puts out 1 GW. You'd need 47 nuclear power plants to get that 10 kg package to Mars in 10 days.

This still sounds like a problem.

Now I have an idea (few utterances are more dangerous than that).

The problem with using photons is that only a very small amount of energy in a photon is actually transferred to the sail. The sail robs just a little bit of the photon energy. This manifests itself by the photon getting slightly red-shifted (moving to a longer wavelength). But we are talking incredibly small shifts and energy transfers — on the order of 1 part in a million. The vast majority of the energy in the photon is wasted. The photon bounces off the sail, and that is that.

What to do?

The obvious answer is to recycle the photons. Rather than just letting the photons bounce off into deep space, you need to reflect them back to the laser source and then reflect them back at the sail for another energy transfer — Multi-Bounce.

What limits the number of times you can re-bounce the beam is the ability to steer the beam back and forth between the laser and the sail, the reflectivity of the sail, and the temperature of the sail. As it turns out, steering is not a rate-limiting problem. The ability to aim a laser over long distances is well in hand (particularly one which is outside Earth's atmosphere, courtesy of a decade's worth of Star Wars programs, and the more recently developed military ABL (airborne laser) which is scheduled to come on line in a couple of years and is designed to use a laser mounted in a jet to blast a hole in a launching missile that is many hundreds of miles away).

The reason that reflectivity of the sail is an issue, is because there is no such thing as a perfect reflector. Those photons that are not reflected from the sail get absorbed by it. This has two very negative effects. The first is that you quickly start to run out of laser beam. Imagine that you have a material with a very high reflectivity of 99%, meaning that for every 100 photons that strike it, 99 get reflected (to calibrate you, a super shiny aluminum sheet, buffed to a high luster, might have a reflectivity of 95%). This means with each bounce you lose 1% of the beam energy. By the time you've made a few hundred bounces, you've got nothing left in the beam — it's all been absorbed in the sail. And that leads to the second problem, since that absorption takes the form of thermal energy. Not only are you losing your beam, you will quickly melt your sail.

Fortunately, in the past few decades a whole new range of super-efficient reflectors has been developed, many of them used as the mirrors in the tiny semiconductor lasers used in your CD players. Reflectivities of 99.995% are possible.

But let's be conservative.

Assume that a reflectivity of only 99.95% is achievable, so that 2000 laser passes can be easily achieved. What does this buy for you?

The effective power of your laser can now be expressed by:

$$\text{Effective Power} = P \times N$$

where P is the power of the laser beam, and N is the number of round-trip bounces that it makes. With 2000 passes, we've effectively made a laser that is 2000 times more powerful.

For purposes of this example, let's assume that we only have a single nuclear power plant at our disposal as an energy source for the laser system used to push our sail craft around the solar system. So we are talking an available power of 1 GW (1×10^9 watts). But remember, with 2000 passes, the effective power becomes 2000 GW.

With all this power, how hot will the sail get? I won't crunch all the numbers here, but you find that if you want to keep the sail temperature below 500° C (a reasonable limit for the type of materials used for these high temperature reflectors) when using a 1000 GW effective laser, the sail must have a diameter of at least 200 meters. If it gets any smaller, then you concentrate too much energy in too small a space and the sail temperature really will start to take off.

Think about an ant sitting at the focal point of a magnifying glass and you'll get a picture of what this means.

Now you've still got the diffraction limit problem. You can't just keep blasting away at the sail forever — it eventually gets too far away, and the beam spreads out past the edge of the sail.

So this is what we'll do.

Let's assume that the sail, as well as the reflecting mirror back at the laser, have a diameter of 1000 meters, and that our laser light has a wavelength of 10^{-6} m (a typical infrared laser). This means that if we go back to our diffraction limit equation above, by the time the beam has traveled 4.2×10^{11} meters, the laser beam begins to spill its energy past the edge of the sail.

But remember, even though the beam can travel 4.2×10^{11} meters, the maximum distance of the ship before we start to spill the beam over the edge is 2000 times less than this, since the beam is being bounced back and forth 1000 times.

So the beam reaches its diffraction limit when the sail is only 4.2×10^{8} meters from Earth, which is a mere 2.1×10^{5} kilometers, a distance which is only 1/500 of the 100 million kilometer journey to Mars.

So what does this mean?

You turn your laser on at the beginning of the trip, letting it blast until the craft reaches a distance of 2.1×10^{5} km, and then turn off the laser, thereby halting the craft's acceleration, and let it cruise the rest of the way to Mars. As it gets to Mars you will need a second laser system on that planet, or in its orbit, to decelerate the craft.

If we allow ourselves a craft that weighs in at 10 tonnes and carries 10 tonnes of cargo, how long will it take to get to Mars? Using the above equations, you will find that the laser is only turned on for 10 hours before you reach the diffraction limit. At this point the craft is moving away from the Earth at a velocity of 12 kilometers/second.

This is fast.

The 20 tonne craft will reach Mars in 96 days (1/2 to 1/3 the time currently being proposed with chemical rockets).

But here's the real kicker. How much did it cost to move that 10 tonnes of cargo to Mars? That's easy to calculate. We are using a power source of 1×10^{9} watts (our nuclear power plant), for a total of 20 hours (10 during launch on Earth and 10 during capture on Mars). If we assume a 25% efficiency in transforming the electricity from the nuclear plant into photons in the laser beam (a reasonable number for current systems), you can calculate the total energy, E, required for the trip:

$$E = Pt/h$$

where t is 20 hours, h is the 25% efficiency, and P the 1×10^{9} watt. Plug those in and you find that you have used 8×10^{7} kW-hr. That might not mean much to you, until you realize that electricity costs about $0.03 kW-hr. This means that the total energy cost to move 10 tonnes of cargo to Mars is $2.4 million, or only $240/kg. Current launch systems take payloads from the Earth's surface to low Earth orbit for a cost nearly 100 times greater than that.

Is this whole analysis some sleight of hand, and I've missed some critical point that will shoot the entire concept down? That's what I thought at first. Then I discussed it in detail with Bob Forward and Geoff Landis. It looked good to them. In the summer of '99, I presented this concept at the Second Annual Mars Society Conference in Boulder, Colorado. The audience was pretty enthusiastic and could find nothing wrong with the concept.

In fact, the idea is as good today as when it was *first* developed nearly 15 years ago by a researcher named Tom Meyer and presented at a Mars meeting in the mid-80s.

But I knew nothing about it — no actual paper was published, just the presentation was given, so unless I had been attending, there was no real way of knowing about it.

Yet another example of just how rare a truly original idea is.

So this idea has been around for a while now, and the materials, laser, and guidance engineering needed to make it a reality are not something requiring huge breakthroughs, or 50 years of development work.

This could work now.

Something to think about. ❑

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The Future is Never What It's Supposed to Be

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Close Quarters

By Stefano Donati

Art by Larry Blamire

I'd had visitors. Waking, surfacing, I felt right away the difference, the sense of no longer being alone.

On the dresser lay my spiralbound notebook. The first page bore two messages. Reading them made me glad I'd chosen not to leave a tape recorder; the sound of two strange voices might have made me sprout goosebumps. Especially given where those voices would have emerged from.

Hello. My name is Larry Erskine: twenty-one, very fit, very tall, with a flock of wavy blond hair. At least, that's how I used to be.

You'll notice that on the front cover of this notebook, our host advises us that if we each write something down as we surface, introduce ourselves to each other, the adjustment'll be easier. He says we should all think of ourselves as roommates.

So let me write this: I'm disgusted at getting this fat body. Maybe after

Wheir am I? Mommy said if I asked peepel theyd tell and help me. She said I was going to be deffrint but she never said how. I dont' want to be a giunt man and be grownup. The only cool thing about this is being tall enuf to see the mirore. My name is Hare but reelly its Harriet Melinda Harlow. Can you peepel help me?

When Erskine felt himself blinking out, he must have passed a few instructions on to her. Uh-oh, I'm fading, and a kid is taking over. Well, kid, whatever you do, write in the book on the dresser. Like a nurse catching up the relief.

Parents sacrificing a child's body to the cause — and not sticking around to explain it all to her. It was this kind of zealotry that gave our Society a bad name.

A whiner and a child; not the kind of brainmates I'd have wished for. Still, as their new home, I felt obliged to follow my own advice and make an entry. I sat on the bed and wrote:

Ethan Renkurst here. Your host. For the record, I'm twenty-five, a college student. I wanted Hosting Status because of the discount, and also I guess I've just always loved having company.

However many of us are in here, we all need to take care of Harriet.

This next bit is for her:

Harriet, if a mom and dad have twenty-five kids, they just don't have enough space or energy for them all. Can you understand that? Well, the Earth has that same problem: too many of us. But there's a way to help. There's an organization, a group, called the Society for Personality Fusion. If you're in it, you can decide to get a kind of operation done on you, and then your mind is in a different body, which you share with a few other people. It's called a Pride. The minds in this Pride take turns being awake. It's less wasteful than the old way of just one person per body, so it's easier on the Earth.

This is what's happened to you. I know it's scary, Harriet; it's scary for the rest of us, too.

If you ever have questions, or if you ever get so scared that you need to talk, just write in this notebook. When we surface, when we "awake," one of us will write back. And if you ever feel like you're in danger, just "blink out" — which is like sleeping — and one of us will take over.

I didn't promise her I'd exercise more and eat less now that I was housing a child. And I didn't tell her to hate her parents, wherever they were, for having forced this on her without her consent.

I didn't have time; I blinked out. 6:35 PM.

The next time I surfaced, daybreak loomed over me. I lay face-down in gravel, in an alley off Tenth Street.

Only after I stood and pried pebbles off my jeans did I feel the blood pouring onto my sweatshirt. My hands were a gushing river. I rubbed my face on my sleeve. More blood dripped off.

Pieces of beer bottle surrounded me.

There were so many reactionaries out there, sufferers of Single Personality Disorder, people unnerved by our organization and principles, people who resented our telling them that their refusal to brainpool was selfish and backward and irresponsible ... people who could not stand the truth.

Such people often ambushed Prides.

Why had I agreed to this? Barely eight thousand Prides in all of North America — too few to successfully lobby for more protection, too few to win over wavering media groups, too few even to help the Earth much. Easing overpopulation problems was important, but important enough for me to be spinning home past staring pedestrians, with blood plopping onto my sneakers the whole time?

After rushing home, washing, and calming

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myself — these gashes might never fade — I found no fresh entry in the notebook. Never mind etiquette; fatigue alone usually induces a brain to blink out after ten hours, tops. But this last alter had stayed on the surface for twelve — and left nothing; not even a scribbled hello before leaving my flat and getting attacked.

Two facts, then:

This alter had stamina. And was secretive.

And maybe a third:

Maybe this alter had been purposely singled out. Secrecy, after all, often nurtures danger and is nurtured by it.

I wrote down what had happened to us. Then I summoned little Harriet to the surface and relinquished consciousness to her, lingering just long enough to perceive her consternation at being, still and always, in the body of a huge adult male. I let her get ready for school. My own college classes, I was willing to skip. I'd have to ask Professor Winter, soon, about doing an independent-study program after all.

I surfaced to blazing sunlight and the screams of frightened children. My eyes stung from tears. A seesaw, swings, a slide, a woman leading two dozen kids toward me. Harriet's teacher and classmates, at recess. "What happened?" the woman yelled at me. Her manner and voice were fraught with concern.

Harriet must have just blinked out, and I'd taken over.

A little boy pointed. "That man," he said. "That man got her crying." We watched a figure slip into the passenger's side of a green elec-sedan which then drove off.

Earlier a completed attack, and now an attempted one.

The woman touched my arm. For me the contact was almost arousing, but to Harriet it would have simply been comforting. "A million times I've told you girls," said the woman. "Harriet only looks like a grown male; you need to include her in your games. Nobody was paying her any attention, were they? That's how this happened — that man saw her alone, and he figured ..." The woman paused, not wanting to scold them so much that they started blaming Harriet.

Leaning up close to me, so the other kids couldn't hear, the woman said, "Harriet, honey, it's a good thing your daddy didn't hurt you. Because he'd have gotten hurt right back, I swear."

Her daddy.

The woman withdrew her arms. "Recess is over, everybody," she yelled. "Mrs. Appellini'll run the class 'til I get in." The other kids filed sullenly toward the schoolhouse stairs, wishing they could eavesdrop.

By pretending still to be Harriet, maybe I could learn about this creep of a father. Our assailant in the alley, no doubt. Was he also the one who'd arranged to have her put inside me? Did he miss her now, did he want his baby girl back, and was he ignorant enough to believe he could simply lift her out of me, return her to her original child's body? Didn't he know that body had been destroyed?

Never having heard Harriet speak, I attempted a generic little-girl voice. "I hate him," I said. But only on the best syllable, "hate," was the octave plausibly high.

"Harriet, honey," said the woman, "maybe you'd better go under for a while. I mean, if you stay conscious it'll be arduous."

"What's 'arduous'?" I asked, in a better voice this time, but the woman still jabbed a finger into my ribs. "I used that word in class yesterday, and I defined it, and as one of my best students Harriet was listening and learned it. Who are you, and why are you pretending to be her?"

"I'm her host," I said, and my abrupt shift into baritone hoarseness startled her. "When Harriet's father scared her, she blinked out and I surfaced. I'd like to think she asked for me specifically."

"And why wouldn't she ask for her mother?"

The question confused me at first, but then I understood.

The mother was inside me.

"I think," said the woman, "we'd better stop talking now."

"In other words, although I house these two, I have no right to find out why they're in here?"

"Confidentiality."

"We all share a body, ma'am; if they're in danger, so am I."

The woman eyed me warily, but nodded. Two little girls in line on the schoolhouse stairs watched us and could probably tell, from the woman's altered tone, that she wasn't talking to their classmate any more.

"Leslie — that's Harriet's mom — Leslie's going to be upset when she finds out I told you. The only reason she even let me know was so I'd watch over her daughter." The woman hesitated, folded her arms. "Officially, Harriet's mom is a Missing Person."

"But only officially, right?" As I spoke, the laughter of a fresh batch of children pealed across the grounds; another grade's recess had begun. "She ran away from something, didn't she?"

"Her son-of-a-bitch ex-husband. A drunk, a beater, a thief. She figured the best way to escape him would be to enter a Pride with Harriet and not tell him. She paid a lot of money to make sure she and Harriet wound up together — and that the host would be male. A male host would be safe, was her reasoning, because her ex would never imagine she'd go that far. And I mean, what are you, mid-twenties? Being in your body means Harriet will die about twenty years earlier than she normally would have." The woman sighed. "And if her dad finds her, it'll be even sooner — for all of you."

"What's this guy look like?"

"All I know is what we saw today."

Not much, in other words. Short but skinny, and swift enough to join his driver before any of us got a better look at him.

Secretive alter, I know who you are. I won't be your savior, that isn't my style. But, for your daughter's sake, let me help.

And, Harriet, I'm really sorry about what you had to go through this morning. It's been a horrible week, hasn't it? First waking up in this big, fat, grown-up male body, and then today. You're about eight, I bet, right? Did you know my brother has a little girl your age? I won't get to see them now; my brother doesn't go for Prides, and I'm persona non grata to him. That's Latin for "We don't want you around."

Harriet, I'm glad you called on me when you had to today. And I hope that, very soon, your mommy will write us a note.

I was sick of surfacing. Sick and surfacing — hovering over the toilet, puking out indiscernible meals and little blue pills, rocking back and forth, beset by awful heaving sensations that too rarely resulted in anything solid.

When I felt sure the last of the vomit had spilled out, I slapped water on my face and toweled off, then sat on the bed and opened the notebook:

Somebody's trying to kill us. But I'm going to do it for them. I hate this body and I want to be rid of it.

One overdose, four deaths. So do I qualify as a serial killer?

— Larry

Erskine had swallowed those pills, a cowardly way to end it, and he'd even had the gall to blink out — leaving me to do the actual suffering. Luckily, he'd underestimated the number of pills required to vanquish a 250-pound mass.

An arrogant depressive, and mother-daughter runaways from a madman. No, very definitely not the kind of brainmates I'd have wished for. Someday, when it grew less desperate for business, maybe the fusion company would make its background checks more thorough.

The alarm clock said it was almost time for Holographic Art. I grabbed a pen from the dresser, intending to burn a few choice words into the notebook. Erskine had no right, just for some suicidal whim, to kill off the whole Pride.

I stopped. There was another entry, just above his:

Yes, Harriet, Mommy is in here. She didn't want to write anything because she didn't know what the other people in here were like; for all she knew, they might even be friends of Daddy's. But she'll never desert you like that again, sweetheart. Promise.

Ethan, Larry: I'm Leslie Harlow, nice to greet you. Twenty-eight years old and petrified. That gap in the notebook ... I'm responsible for it. Maybe if I'd written sooner, Harriet would have been reassured I was in here — just as I vowed I'd be. Ethan, do you have any idea what it's like to find out that when my child needed help, on that playground, she called on you and not me?

I think you'll understand why I'm a little skittish. It was my ex-husband Carl who saw me on the street, pulled me into that alley, and sliced up our face. Your face. This new body didn't protect me. Not when he knew I loved a midnight walk, not when he heard me whistling "Ave Maria" as he approached, not when I gave him this stupid coy look that said, You'll never recognize me. He must have greased somebody at the fusing lab and found out I was a hefty male now — sorry, Ethan. I used to get beatings like that every day, I can take them, so I stayed on the surface for this one.

I surfaced again an hour ago, Ethan, read your rather oblique entry, and asked Mrs. Durkin at the school and she filled me in. Hare must be terrified. She used to see with her own little eyes how he treated me — not the worst of it, certainly, but enough.

Harriet, sweetheart, you're going to be all right.

I'm switching now to a more erudite level of epistolary communication, so that my cherubic issue will be unable to discern its essence. The

aforementioned guarantee to said issue is unduly optimistic. I am convinced my former betrothed wants to liquidate us all.

You shouldn't have to be caught in this, Ethan. But the compassion you've shown my cherub and me ... I'm grateful.

You'd have made a much better sire, and mate, than a certain someone ever was.

I reread the entry so many times that it almost made me late for class.

And then I wrote a response that did make me late: one that thanked Leslie for her kind words, and asked for pictures of her and Harriet as they had looked in their old bodies.

And then I wrote one more line, which I immediately crossed out — over and over, so none of them could read it. It was foolish, poorly thought out, totally devoid of logic. I mean, Leslie was living inside me.

It invited her to ... well ... meet me for coffee.

"Ethan, it's been ages!"

The blonde woman and I were barely into our first do-si-do. I'd come to this contra dance on Leslie's written advice. You'll have fun; here, I'll even pay for you, and blink out when you step onto the floor.

My reward for helping Harriet.

"Ethan, can't you place me?"

That voice ...

Caitlin Buhler. But not the Caitlin Buhler I'd known in high school — not the Caitlin Buhler so covered in pimples, so cross-eyed and plain, that I'd never once managed a humane comment while she was in earshot. This woman was willowy, with beautiful skin and slender legs and a smile that could warm Pluto — the character or the planet.

"Caitlin Buhler?" I said.

"Caitlin Buhler," she said. Her gait, her voice, the way her lips curled right before she spoke ... everything about Caitlin Buhler had been grafted onto this divine body.

Caitlin Buhler.

I promenaded her down the set. Leslie's gracefulness hadn't stayed after my surfacing; ever clumsy, I stepped on the foot of the man ahead of me.

"So, Ethan, where are you living these days?" Cheery question; Caitlin had apparently forgiven all my old insults.

"The apartment house on Billings Street."

She smiled at that. I started to ask her why, maybe she knew someone there, but the dance wound down. The caller announced that a waltz would be next. She took my hand. "Be my partner?"

"Caitlin, are you flirting with me?"

"Silly. Of course I am. Tonight, Ethan, you're mine."

This glorious body had given her the confidence to be assertive. But why with me? What allure could I have? "Caitlin, when it comes to tall, dark, and handsome, I'm oh for three."

"So? I was ugly once, remember? Besides, I always kind of liked you."

Despite how I'd treated her in high school. Or because of it. Either way, I wish I had been more suspicious.

"What's the point of this?" I said. "What if ... what if ..."

What if she and I started getting affectionate after the dance, and one of my brainmates suddenly surfaced? Things would get nonconsensual in a hurry.

But she didn't know there were others inside me. I might be able to stay surfaced just long enough ...

"No," I said. "We can't even dance."

She looked puzzled; men never turned her down. Not these days.

How could I explain to her that all night I'd been dwelling on Leslie?

Dwelling with Leslie.

I knew the folly of it. Falling in love with a woman who looked just like me.

But Leslie had never once complained about being made fat, let alone downright corpulent; she had properly thanked me for my help; she obviously shared my views on the virtue of Prides; she was a caring mother and Harriet needed an equally caring dad; and I didn't want to court anyone else, not even the new and improved Caitlin Buhler — to whom my entry that night made specific reference, with the closing thought that "bedding her would have been cheap. I'd prefer someone more serious, more sensitive."

Leslie would admire my restraint.

Ethan, I've left three photos on the dresser: one of me, one of Hare, one of the two of us together. Now it's your turn. We also need a kid picture or two. Hare's at that stage where I think she needs visual evidence that any adult was ever a child.

Erskine here. My own photo's on the dresser. Nobody asked for it, even though you so very much wanted each other's. But here.

I wonder how I'd have aged, if I'd stayed in my old body. Gray hair like my dad, or baldness like my uncle? But I want to write about you. Leslie and Ethan. I've surfaced after both of you, and there's a lingering warm feeling every time. I think you two are kind of sweet on each other.

Why not go co-conscious? Surface together?

Co-conscious, you will become each other.

Leslan and Ethie. Total understanding, total joining. Have you ever read the love poetry written together by co-conscious brainmates? It's gooey to us, but to them it's sincere. They're literally almost one entity.

At this late stage, I'm an obstacle. Every moment I'm in surface time is one more moment that the two of you are kept apart. So, this time, I am going to kill myself.

Don't worry; my demise won't cause yours. I'm just going to leave — slip down and not come back. Please don't try to summon me. It'll be a quiet little death, not exactly in keeping with my customary behavior, but it'll keep you going.

I think you should squelch the kid, too, but you'll say that's my craziness talking.

I notice my handwriting's already getting more careful, more exact. Every character is tidy and well formed and complete now, the o's perfect circles, the lines all stopped at exactly the proper point. Part of me wants to prolong this.

I'm procrastinating. Ambivalent about dying.

But really, when you read this, don't get me to surface. Please.

And don't bother having any funeral service.

I'm going under now.

Th-th-th-that's all, folks.

TO: Leslie
FROM: Ethan
RE: Erskine's note

We can't let Erskine have died in vain. I'd like to hear how your voice sounds, to see in a mirror just how you smile — even if it is on my face.

I'd like us to try co-consciousness.

By the way: I love the pictures.

Ethan, about co-consciousness ... I don't want Erskine to have died in vain, either, and I hope he was serious about our not trying to summon him, I hope it wasn't just a cry for help ... but let me tell you a story:

One time in college, I was taking a final exam, European History. Halfway through, all of a sudden the woman next to me said "No!" She belonged to a Pride and was yelling at a five-year-old brainmate, her son, who was impatient to surface. She wasn't about to be forced under and fail the course for him, so she said to him, "Hold on a minute," and asked the proctor for an extra bluebook.

And the woman and her son went co-conscious.

The left hand, under her control, wrote in one bluebook. At the same time the right hand, under his, drew in the other.

After the exam, she kept the little boy surfaced, and most of my classmates played with him. Cute scene, they all thought.

Then she collapsed. She, the boy, the other brains in there, the whole body, all went dead. Permanently.

Love poetry? Very dangerous. If alters get co-conscious for too long, it puts stress on the Pride. Like a computer overload, I suppose. When you went to the fusion agency, they probably told you that kind of thing is rare. But I saw it happen. I really wish they'd stop being so dismissive about these dangers. Of course, then I suppose everyone would stay singleton and we'd never get below six billion bodies.

You're a very kind man, Ethan Renkurst. And

I'm going to walk the plank and admit something: as Erskine guessed, I have feelings for you, even if they're not quite at love-level yet.

If they get there, if you're agreeable, if we're both in a brave mood, then we could try co-consciousness. Just for a few minutes.

But I won't put Harriet in any extra danger.

Mommy, I like this man Ethan and if daddy wont' be daddy anymore, can Ethan be? I think hed' make you a good huzbund.

This was ridiculous. Biking home from my meeting with Professor Winter, I kept forgetting the good news, his "I'll gladly let you study independently, young Renkurst." Instead, I kept mulling over Harriet's entry, hopeful that her opinion would further encourage her mom. As I hit the driveway, I even debated composing a poem for this woman I could never touch.

Very ridiculous.

A man stood on the porch, the overhang keeping him from being roasted by the burning sun. I assumed he was waiting for someone else in the apartment house.

Then I recognized him. The man who'd slipped inside the elec-sedan.

Leslie's ex-husband Carl.

"You realize, don't you," he said, "that this is your last day on Earth."

"Actually, a better line would be 'Today is the last day of the rest of your life.' "

"You're taking this awfully well."

I couldn't let him know otherwise; I shrugged modestly. "It's just that you failed in the alley. All that beer bottle did was bloody us up a bit. The scars aren't even that visible."

"I've upgraded." He flipped open his jacket, unveiling a shiny new gun. "Oh ... thanks for telling Caitlin where you lived."

Probably they were lovers. He'd told her about Leslie's damned dancing, and she'd gone there to sweet-talk me home, where no doubt he'd been waiting to ambush me. But my fidelity to Leslie had thwarted him.

For a while.

"You're going to shoot me in broad daylight?"

"Not you; Leslie. I'm not firing until she surfaces; I want her to be the one who feels the impact."

"She might not surface for hours."

"Then we'll just wait, you and I. And I'll know when it happens; I'm pretty familiar with her mannerisms."

I decided to scream for help. And since, even in these modern times, a woman's scream compels more attention ... I wanted Leslie to join me.

Co-consciousness. Just for a moment.

Surface, I thought. Leslie, come to the surface.

Her groggy self floated up and when she saw Carl we were both screaming successfully, in harmony. Doing a duet in B Nervous Major.

"Quit it!" Carl — I couldn't call him Carl; Harlow, I supposed — lifted his gun toward us. "Who's on the surface now?" I answered. "Just us: Leslie and Ethan."

"Not the crazy one?"

Leslie answered: "Erskine ... isn't here right now." She had the right side of my mouth; I'd taken the left.

"And Harriet?"

"She isn't here either." Leslie's answer prompted a change in his expression. Relief. I could tell it was relief. His daughter would not be conscious when he killed her.

"Ethan," Leslie whispered, "it's been a couple of minutes already. One of us is going to have to blink out." She paused; I could almost feel her hesitation. "Carl would prefer it if I stayed on the surface. I'm the one he wants."

She wasn't about to give him that satisfaction. But she also wasn't about to impose final consciousness on me.

There was another alternative.

Very softly, I said to Leslie, "Harriet can save us."

"If Hare surfaced now, she'd be terrified."

"Stop muttering," Harlow said. "Speak up."

I kept my voice low. "Exactly: terrified. Why do you think he asked if she was on the surface just now? He doesn't want his daughter to realize she's about to die."

"Ethan, you don't know him like I do. You make Hare come up, and so help me I'll stick you with my worst PMS hours from now on."

"Dear heart, you can't get PMS anymore. I'm a male body, remember?"

Leslie contorted my face with a scowl. "You'll never know what you're missing."

"I'm making her surface."

"No." Loudly enough for her ex-husband to hear. She wanted him to hear, so he'd shoot right away. "No, if we die, we die, but I will not expose my child to conscious — "

Harriet, honey, this is Ethan. Wake up. Please wake up now. Almost instantly, we were tri-conscious.

"Blink out, Leslie. Blink out. Let her take over."

"Ethan, goddamn you."

We had to slip fast; Harriet's mannerisms needed to be all over the body, be so visible that Harlow couldn't help but realize it was her terror and not ours.

Leslie did blink out, finally.

What happened then, we learned later. From the police, and from Harriet's next entry:

When I woke up today daddy was on the portch and he had that anggry look he use to get right before he use to hit you, mommy. I tryed not to be scared, but that old cupple from next door came out and they saw I was scared all the same. Its The Kid Now, the lady in the cupple said. And they ordurred daddy to tell them why I was scared, and daddy started crying, and then he ran up to me and hugged me. He was saying he haits you, and he haits me, but then why was he hugging us, mommy? I think maybe he haits us and loves us too.

I'd settle for that from Leslie: having her hate me and love me too.

Every day it's something different. A library book I'm reading has been torn to shreds. My favorite compact discs have been smeared with tomato sauce. My bicycle tires are flat. Or my most-recent entry asking Harriet to put in a good word for me has been cut out.

Every time she surfaces, Leslie thinks up a new revenge.

Even though it saved all our lives, she'll never forgive me for making her daughter surface into danger that day.

Sharing a body with the woman you care for is maddening.

But sharing a body with the woman who loathes you is worse. ❑

OUR NEXT ISSUE

The cover for the next issue of *Aboriginal SF* is another three-dimensional sculpture created by artist David Deitrick. In this case it's a sculpture of Larry Niven's Pak Protector "Phssthpok." The next issue also will feature "Waterdog," another story by Dennis Fisher set in the same locale as "Locals" (*Abo* #62) and "Feeders" (*Abo* #63). We will also be offering "How the Witnesses Hooked Me," by Mary Soon Lee, "No Job Too Small," by Wil McCarthy, "Down in the Park," by Russell A. Miller, "Dead Star Prize," by Steven Mohan, and "I Have no Blimp and I Must Dream," by David Bischoff, and our regular features and columns.

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Mr. Harriman's Peculiar Vigil

By Joseph Flanagan

Art by Cortney Skinner

Where I sit, on a terrace high above the Mediterranean, I smell parched earth and sage, and that clean solar fragrance things have when they have baked all day in dry heat. On the horizon, the sun is swollen and weird, dissolving into a runny syrup over the ocean. I look down at the enormous hairy mass of my stomach bulging over my Y-fronts and realize that my wife has appeared on the terrace. She asks me, in the hand-wringing way she has recently adopted, if I am going to get dressed for my speech. "Get me another drink, please, Vicky," I tell her. I do not tell her that what she suspects is true: that the god of the modern pharmaceuticals industry, widely published essayist, renowned billionaire and patron of the arts, is meditating on the night the Martians visited Frank Sills.

You have probably read about me. It is hard to find a pill, salve, or syrup that does not have my name on it. I am the Harriman of Davis-Harriman Pharmaceuticals. I am a peculiar hybrid of successful industrialist and man of letters. Three volumes of my essays have been published to critical acclaim, and negotiations with my publisher on a fourth are underway. Two major art museums in Washington, D.C., bear my name, as well as an established chain of banks in New York and Connecticut. I will not bore you with the details, since they have been widely written about. Briefly, my good fortune stems from an investment I made in a fledgling pharmaceuticals company after I graduated from Yale. I must add, though, that I have always had an ability to discern trends and a knack for causing assets to multiply. Until recently, I was an omnivorous reader, and was blessed with boundless energy. This damned Martian thing, though, it saps my strength. It's like making love.

I am in my seventy-seventh year, but I am lucid and reasonably healthy. By nature I am practical, skeptical, and moderate. Under normal circumstances, I would think that this business of sunsets and Martians was old age creeping up on me. But it has nothing to do with age. It is youth. Youth is creeping up on me.

A lizard darts through the dry underbrush. Victoria's heels on the flagstones tell me she is already dressed for dinner. She hands me a glass of pastis. "Jean-Rémy will bring the car around at seven. I spoke with Hélène a moment ago. She and Professor Desormais are going to meet us in the foyer of the Hôtel de Ville." A motor is idling at the bottom of the cliffs. I peer over the bed of ornamental cacti and see a fisherman standing in his boat, pulling mussels out of a rake. What an eerie, hulking spectacle he is, obscured in the netherworld of light and shadows at the base of the cliffs. His hat is pulled low over his eyes. I wait for him to look up at me, pull the brim back, and show me he is a grinning Martian. I pat my belly and stretch my bare feet out over the flagstones. The skin of my scalp is taut and bristly to the touch, and I feel the stirring of a low, humming energy.

In Somerville, Massachusetts, where I grew up, there was a man named Frank Sills who was known to be the neighborhood drunk. He often walked past our house, on his way, we presumed, to the package store in town, because he always came back holding what looked like a bottle in a paper bag. We recognized his forward-lurching walk and oversized touring cap from far off, and without a word, we would leave our games at the verge of the dirt road and retreat farther into the yard until he passed. We would stand in the shadows of the tall maples like trees ourselves, gaping at him. Then we would go back to our games and repeat the drill on his return trip. There was something about his woollen sport jacket and the way he never stopped smiling at the ground that frightened me.

But when we learned, as all children do, to become cruel and predatory, we sought him out and shouted things at him from the safety of our yards. One summer morning, we followed him. There were five of us. At first, we were only interested in seeing where he went. But gradually, we became bolder and began to taunt him. Before long, we were just a few yards behind him, and one of the boys, I don't remember anymore who, started throwing stones. Frank Sills never turned around, but at one point, he veered off the road and climbed an embankment. The profusion of black-eyed Susans that grew there is still a vivid picture. We followed, all of us throwing stones now. The rise leveled off to a scrubby meadow, and it was there that we found him facing us, standing in the middle of the field with his arms

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C
SKINNER

hanging down by his sides and grasshoppers leaping all around him. We stood five abreast, looking at one another, wondering what to do next. Finally, someone threw a stone and said, "Where are you going, you old souse?"

"Yeah. Where are you going, Mister Boozer?"

Courageous again, we let out a chorus of jeers in our high, playground voices and showered him with rocks. To our astonishment, Frank Sills raised his hands over his head and turned around several times like a ballerina. He turned his face to the sun and laughed, which silenced us immediately. I saw that he was unshaven and had few teeth. "They come to me!" he called out, his voice hoarse and phlegmy. "They come to me and it is *so nice!*" He twirled again, stumbling, then stopping to cough and laugh. "The Martians. They come out of my radio. Peace on earth, good will to men." We moved back to the crest of the embankment, laughing nervously. Suddenly, there was a grasshopper on my arm, and I slapped it away frantically. We left Frank Sills in the meadow, laughing, saying something in Latin, and doing his odd little pirouette in the tall grass.

Victoria peers out at me through the patio doors, then goes off somewhere. Music is playing in the villa above us. It is Doctor Hildebrandt from Stanford and his boyfriend, Thierry.

Fondation Camargo is run under the auspices of a consortium of American and European universities, primarily the Sorbonne. This complex of elegant little houses here in Cassis serves as a retreat of sorts for authors and scholars of various types. There is a small library in an early seventeenth-century château on the waterfront, equipped with the latest online reference services. There are speeches, musical performances, impromptu debates. I think of it as a Chatauqua on the Mediterranean for academics. Phyllis Timlin wrote her best-selling biography of me here. Being a prominent benefactor of Yale, I come here as I please. In fact, they are thrilled to have me. A dinner has been planned for this evening at the Hôtel de Ville: a chance for everyone to introduce themselves to one another. Unfortunately, it has also turned into a sort of testimonial event for me. My speech is taken from an unpublished essay, an odd one for me. It examines modern progress as self-flagellation, and how our craving for the absolute is both frustrated and heightened in the midst of rapid technological development. Audacious, perhaps, for someone who has made a fortune in breast implants and diaphragms.

What an uncommon hue of red the sunset has colored everything. The stucco on the walls looks as if it has been washed in rusty water. Edith Piaf's voice wails out from Hildebrandt's terrace. Thierry goes past the patio doors, bare-chested, brown as a nut. Victoria comes out, exasperated. "Could you please put something on? I don't understand why you're sitting out here like this. You're practically *naked*. People can see you. *Please*, Rowe."

Many people spend their lives running away from God. I have not. From my childhood in New England, to the attainment of the position and wealth I now enjoy, I have never been interested in God, nor, I suppose, He in me. What I have been running from is a night in June, 1930, when I was eight years old. It sounds melodramatic, does it not? But, there. I have said it. It still makes me feel strange. Nighttime: June, 1930.

After the incident in the meadow above the road, Frank Sills became a near-constant occupation for us. We lay in waiting and ambushed him with rocks. We devised insulting chants, even practiced them, so we could yell them out in unison when he passed. For me, though, the image of Frank Sills's tattered sport jacket flapping away from his sides and the sound of his raw voice in the still meadow were troubling. Once, when I asked my mother what was wrong with Frank Sills, she replied cheerfully, "He's a drunk." Phillip Tobin's sister worked at the switchboard in town, and she showed ill-concealed delight in allowing us to come in when no one was around and harass him over the telephone. Rumors proliferated among the neighborhood children. Frank Sills went mad in the war; Frank Sills was once fabulously wealthy; Frank Sills decapitated the grocery boy and had his head in a vat in the basement.

For a long time, we talked about going to his house at night and spying on him through the windows. We worked ourselves into a state of excitement planning the event, but in the end, it was only a shy, quiet boy, William Bergeron, and me who went. Frank Sills's house was a tiny, rundown bungalow overgrown with weeds and lopsided raspberry bushes. I remember dim light behind drawn shades, and how my heart pounded as I waded into the tall grass. The breeze stirred the branches of some kind of shrub, which moved in slow, pendulous arcs. There was something that looked like a truck, covered with vines. I approached one of the lighted windows and crouched under the sill. Broken glass glinted on the ground, and there was a horrid smell of fish. From inside came the sound of low, gentle laughter. William was frozen in the grass halfway between the right-of-way and the house. I motioned for him to come.

This event has acquired a presence in my life. Why it has returned to me with such power in my old age, and why it demands so forcefully to be reckoned with, I do not know. I have put it to sleep for more than half a century, and lived my life as though it had never taken place.

Victoria calls from inside. "Rowe, I laid your tuxedo out on the bed. Which shoes do you want to wear? Look at the time!" The weather is so pleasant here. A group of cirrus clouds has drifted into the spectacular dissolution of the sun and is irradiated to a glaring pink and rose. Everything is warm and still in the wonderful reddish aura.

In my memory, the inside of the room was a dull brown, and there were rows of chevrons on the walls. I could make out chairs and bookshelves and clothes strewn around the floor. William had taken his place beside me, and we strained to see through the narrow space at the bottom of the window where the shade had not been pulled completely down. My eyes followed the sound of the soft, measured laughter and found Frank Sills's bare feet. Moving back and lowering my head, I saw him sitting in a chair in his shirtsleeves. One hand was on the arm rest. The other was in the lap of someone sitting next to him. I changed position again to get a look at his companion. Sitting beside Frank Sills, caressing his hand with its own, was a tall, slim creature with the translucent skin of a reptile in a specimen jar. It had a narrow neck, frail shoulders, and unspecific genitalia. Its head was disproportionately large and hairless. The face is lost to me, except that I seem to remember a protruding nose and minimal features on the pale open plain of its face. Frank Sills appeared drugged and euphoric. His eyes were moist. "Yes, yes," he said, shifting his feet around. "I see that now. Bless you. It makes perfect sense to me. Of course." Another one rose up from behind an old radio that stood between the two chairs. It put its hands on Frank Sills's shoulders, showing hideously elongated fingers. I could see the bulge of each knuckle. Frank Sills turned his face up toward the second creature. "You always make things so clear to me. Bless you. I'm *so thankful* you came." His expression was beatific.

William Bergeron and I ran the length of the dirt right-of-way and a good distance up the main road. I told no one about it, nor did he. He would not even share the secret with me. He refused to talk about it when I brought it up. As time went on it was as if we had had a sexual encounter of which we were both ashamed. When we were in our twenties, I saw him at a Christmas party during semester break from Yale. We were both drunk. I walked up to him and said, "Don't you remember that night we peeked in old Mr. Sills's window?" He stormed out of the house. Out in the driveway, a friend had to restrain him from smashing the windows of an automobile with his fists.

On the terrace above us, Professor Hildebrandt leans against the rail wearing a white Madras shirt. The remaining wisps of hair on his head rise with a desultory breeze. "Evening, Mr. Harriman."

I raise my glass in his direction.

"You have a thing tonight, don't you?" he asks.

"I may. I'm waiting to find out."

Duly perplexed, he turns his attention to the ocean. "My heavens, that sun is red. Thierry! Come out here and see this. The sky is just fire engine red. Play Piaf again."

Victoria peeks out through the doors again. Long earrings dangle from her ears. "I'm coming, Vicky," I say.

"Hallelujah. Have you got the text of your speech?"

"Um, somewhere, yes."

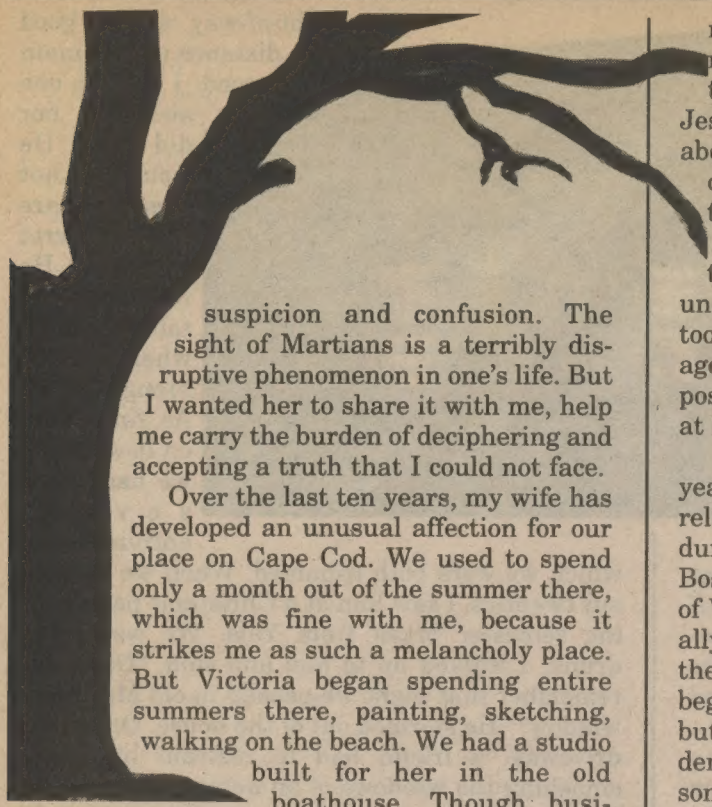
"Well, you're not going without it, are you?"

"Perhaps not."

"Roland, you *never* speak without your text. What are you thinking of? You've got me so worried. *Please* get dressed."

The life we lead has a stultifying effect on Victoria, I feel. She flies from one of our homes to the next, never certain whether she wants to be in Paris, New York, or Antigua. She has virtually everything, yet she is cut off from so much that she needs, living the odd, isolated existence of the well-known and wealthy.

Once, a few years ago, I told Victoria about the night at Frank Sills's house. I understand her



suspicion and confusion. The sight of Martians is a terribly disruptive phenomenon in one's life. But I wanted her to share it with me, help me carry the burden of deciphering and accepting a truth that I could not face.

Over the last ten years, my wife has developed an unusual affection for our place on Cape Cod. We used to spend only a month out of the summer there, which was fine with me, because it strikes me as such a melancholy place. But Victoria began spending entire summers there, painting, sketching, walking on the beach. We had a studio built for her in the old boathouse. Though business obligations gave me ample excuse to be elsewhere, I wound up spending more time on the Cape than I would have liked.

It was in the breakfast room there, looking out at the Seapuit River, that I began to become obsessed with making sense of what I saw. On the wall, above a basket of cattails and dried milkweed, was Winslow Homer's "Dad's Coming." Through long afternoons I sat watching the drab, proletarian Seapuit churn unceremoniously on its way to somewhere else while a kinship of sorts developed between me and the young woman in the painting.

If something was in Frank Sills's house that night, what did it mean for everything else? Of what consequence were my accomplishments in light of the possibility of creatures in Frank Sills's living room? What was the meaning of the wealth I had amassed, of governments, nations, religion, history? Wasn't I obliged to shake up the whole equation now?

A Catholic friend of mine who had endured chronic back pain for years made a pilgrimage to a famous Italian priest who supposedly experienced stigmata and was reported to have charismatic healing powers. At the last moment, my friend refused to enter the church, because he was afraid of what he might see. He would rather live with the pain than reformulate reality.

I was afraid that if what I had seen was real, I would have to live my life for it and take on a completely new perspective on my existence. I was not prepared to do that, and so I chose for it not to be real, driving the event deeper into deep memory for decades. If there are Martians, or creatures, or whatever they are, there could be a Jesus, or a Mohammed, or a Peter Pan. Think about it. It is like living with The Bomb. Aren't we obliged to prostrate ourselves before such things?

So I began to appreciate the attentiveness in the face of the young woman in the painting. I understood her unrelaxed vigilance, because I, too, sat by a seashore watching and waiting. Old age had brought on a willingness to accept any possibility, and I had a sense that something was at hand.

William Bergeron died in a nursing home last year. I managed to track down his only surviving relative, an elderly cousin, who stayed with him during his final illness. I called her at her home in Boston and told her I had been a childhood friend of William's. We chatted for a while, and eventually she said, "You know, the morning Billy died, the most extraordinary thing happened." She began to tell me about this extraordinary thing, but became cautious, then defensive, then hostile, demanding to know who I really was and the reason for my call. After that, I could not reach her.

Victoria stands before me, dumbfounded, a pair of my shoes in one hand, my tuxedo on a hanger in the other. "How can you not go?" she says, her eyes welling up with tears. "You know what a big occasion this is for Camargo. There will be over one hundred people there. Dominique Vatin and everyone at the Sorbonne, how do you think they'll react? My God, Roland, you can't do this!"

I wave her away. "Please, Vicky. I don't want to go. Have Desormais convey my sincere apologies. I don't feel very well."

The truth is, I feel tremendous: giddy, like a boy at Christmas. I want to go down and pinch the brown tits of the German tourists who walk on the beach. Victoria's face ices over, and she stalks back inside. I lean back in my chair watching the sun until I hear the sound of someone settling carefully into a chair behind me. I turn slowly and face my companion. "I knew you were coming," I say to the thing. From inside the villa, I can hear Victoria banging things around, saying, "Terrible embarrassment ... unconscionable."

"Will Vicky know about you?" I ask. It sticks two long fingers into my glass of pastis, which means no. The peace that comes over me when looking into its face is like the effect of a powerful narcotic. I have never felt anything like it before, a kind of cerebral orgasm. It takes my hand. Long into the night, we sit at the table grinning at one another, saying nothing. ❑

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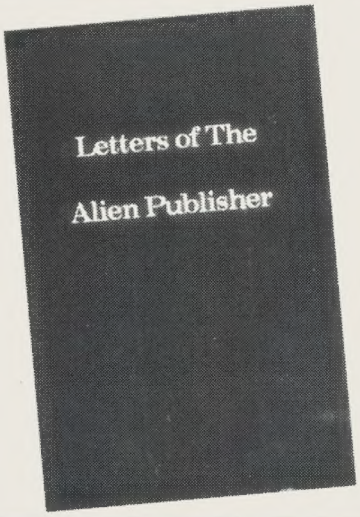

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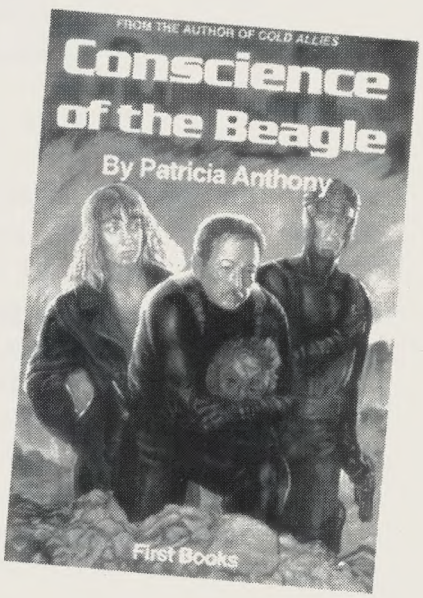

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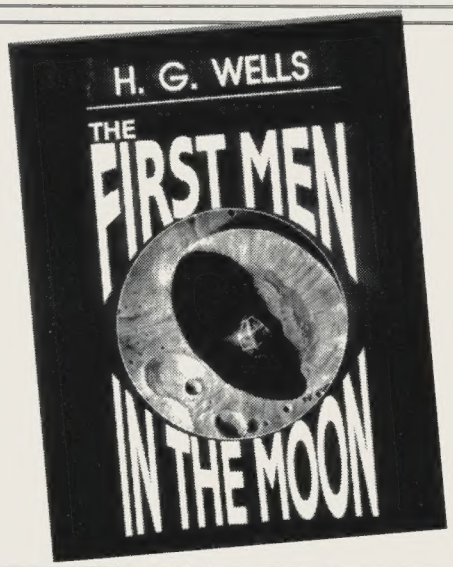

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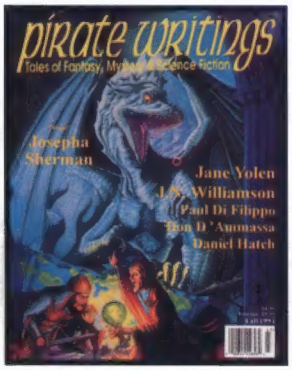

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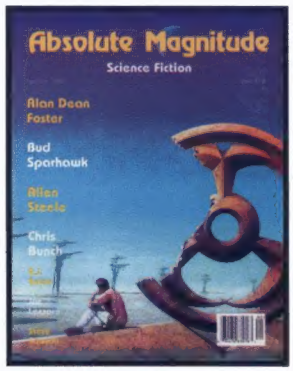

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